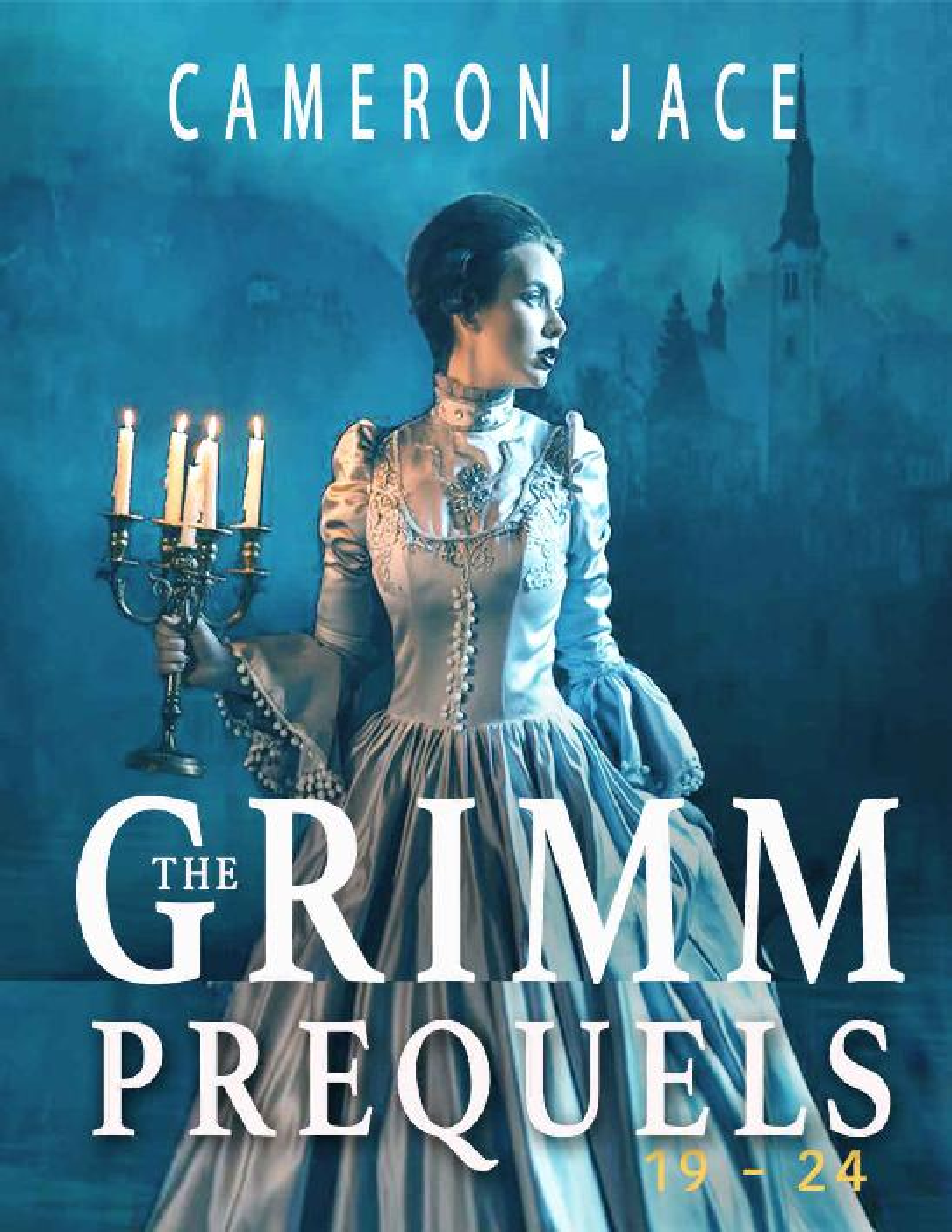
CAMERON JACE



THE GRIMM PREQUELS

19 - 24



The Grimm Prequels 19-24



CAMERON JACE

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“This is a work of fiction. All the characters in it, human and otherwise, are imaginary, except only certain of the fairy folk, whom it might be unwise to offend by casting doubts on their existence. Or lack thereof.”

~ Neil Gaiman

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Foreword From the Author

Important. Please Read.

I'll keep it short.

The Grimm Prequels, no longer called the Grimm Diaries, or being an essential read before the main Grimm Diaries series, is the kind of story that exists because of you, the reader. I'm just the hands and brains that makes it happen.

Three or more years ago they were supposed to be an appetizer for the main series. Then low and behold, the short snappy stories took on a life of their own and turned out to be more popular than the main series – and an instant bestseller.

They are unusual diaries, addictive – even in writing – and turn everything you ever knew about fairy tales on its head.

But that's not just it.

The prequels aren't just my way of chronicling the history of fairy tales, nursery rhymes, and urban legends into a massive volume of entertaining stories. Not anymore. Now that most characters have been fleshed out in the process, it's a character-based series with tons of them being the reader's favorite.

This aims for an almost never-ending set of prequels. Imagine how many fairy tales can be tackled.

Some of the most loved characters haven't even been touched upon yet; consider Ladle Rat, Wolfy, Jack, & Marmalade or even Bloody Mary, to name a few.

But I don't know how long the Grimm Prequels will be released. As long as it takes, I suppose. The best part is that we're in this process together. As

long as you need to know about certain characters and plot points is how long I'm happily obliged to write them.

Again, it's basically your series, not mine.

This set of prequels, diaries 19-24, is the longest ever. They're over 300 pages, and there is a reason for it. I wanted to cement the idea in your head: this is a series of its own now, neither you nor I can change that.

Accompanying this release are the Grimm Prequels 1-18, all in one volume. That's the first four books of prequels all in one. We'll call the boxset: *The Grimm Prequels Books 1-4*, which makes this newer collection of prequels 19 to 2 *The Grimm Prequels Book 5.*

Now the most important part of this foreword!

It's essential that you understand that the format of the series has slightly changed. The Prequels are now read by the Beast. Remember him, the boy from the *Once Beauty Twice Beast*?

In that story he had discovered a mysterious library with an endless supply of Books of Sand. These Books of Sand are the Grimm Prequels you're reading now.

Being a prisoner of the castle, the Beast could only kill time by reading the prequels, not Sandman Grimm.

This makes the notes at the end of each prequel the *Beast's Notes*, not mine. We call them just 'My Notes' now.

And since the Beast has an endless supply of books in the library, he can easily confirm the facts of each prequel and relate them to historical events.

The Beast will slowly discover how he is connected to all of this and why fate led him to be a prisoner of the castle. You'll understand about his emotion through the 'My Notes' he writes. You and him are basically two curious individual, trying to interpret the prequels.

In the end, it will tie up into a major conclusion – but not in this set of prequels, of course.

Don’t be confused. As a devoted Grimm Prequels fan, you will get the feel of it as you read on. It will actually enrich the stories and tie up a lot of loose ends.

I’ve added the prequel *Once Beauty Twice Beast* to this set to catch you up on the Beast, in case you don’t remember it and would like to reread it.

If not, just skip it to the first new prequel in this set: Prequel #19: Friday the Thirteenth.

Stay fabulous,

Cam, the Storykiller.



ONCE BEAUTY TWICE BEAST

as told by Beauty (also known as Beast)

Dear Diary,

Once upon a time, time wasn't on my side…

With a racing heart, I was expecting my visitor to come knocking on my castle's door. The large raven-shaped clock hadn't struck midnight yet, but I knew time was the greatest murderer in history. It always arrived wherever you were, not a tick too soon, and not a tock too late.

I expected my visitor the way you'd anticipate an inevitable kiss… of death.

Beads of sweat had exposed the fears I was hoping to conceal. Damn those sweet fears. How dare I think of them as sweet? They sent chills down my spine, conspiring to stop my hands from writing this entry in my diary.

However, my hands were bound to tell the truth of a tale we all thought we knew so well. Hands are like tongues; acting against our better judgment, screaming out the secrets once kept in the deepest closets of our minds.

"*Things must be loved before they are lovely*," I mumbled to myself, my voice intense, echoing in the room. I repeated the phrase religiously, like a priest reciting a hymn that would save a sinner. *Things must be loved before they're lovely.*

I was breathing heavily, watching waves of moist air shimmering in the candlelight before me.

"Stars must be cherished before they glitter. The moon must be loved before it's full. And the sun must be remembered, even when it's dark," I said, staring at the clock on the wall, ticking; tick tock, tick tock, the

footsteps of time hunting me down. Each passing moment, every breath I took, I was worried I'd hear a tick, but not live long enough to hear its tock.

Looking away from the clock, a canvas hung on the wall in my chamber of solitude. It was Persian. I tried my best not to look at it. It had the same phrase sewn with golden threads into its fabric: *things must be loved before they're lovely.*

"Stop it!" I yelled out, as if talking to ghosts – or the loved ones who I should have been with now, but knew I lost forever.

The phrase on the canvas was killing me. I had to write down my story before my visitor arrived. I had to. There wasn't enough time left to tell the truth about who the real Beauty was, and who was truly the Beast.

People deserved to know the truth.

What makes one evil and what makes one good? I wrote, tightening my grip on the pencil, as if it opposed my will to express myself.

The question on the paper lulled in my head. There were so many questions I wanted to ask, so little time for getting the right answers. Sometimes, I wondered if I was the only one who questioned the origin of tales. Why was it that people didn't care about origins, or where stories really came from?

Who are we to say who is good and who is evil? Who, and what, is beauty and who is beast? I wrote, carving the letters on paper as I closed my eyes, hoping the words would disappear when I opened them again.

They didn't. The words were still there, daring me to answer the question I had just asked.

I looked away from the diary in my hand. Most people would call it a 'diary' when in reality it was a Book of Sand; a binding of unusual pages that dissolved into golden, sparkling grains of sand, once read.

Each book could only be read once, then its contents would be gone, only recognized by the one who read it – and whomever had written it earlier.

But that would only last for another hundred years, when the sand returned into book form again, awaiting a new reader who may, or may not,

use its secrets wisely – if not entirely lie about its content.

Had I never met her, I wouldn't have been exposed to such magic. But I'll come to that later.

I've always wondered about books, stories in particular. Folktales I read from every corner of the world. Tales like the Beauty and the Beast, recurring in different formats and interpretation from a book to book. I couldn't help but notice the inconsistencies of the story, the lack of logic, and different versions of the same tale. My guess was that someone had told someone who had told someone who told someone else… until the story lost its origins.

But I knew the origins of the story. I knew what really happened a long time ago.

Still skeptic, wondering why you should believe me?

That's the easiest part to answer: because I was the beast—or the beauty. It all depends on how you will perceive me by the end of this diary.

Things must be loved before they are lovely.

I took a deep breath, staring at the at canvass again, imagining the clock didn't tick, and wished I could finish my story before my visitor came. *I started writing…*



It all started the day I was born. My parents said it was the happiest day in their lives. I was their seventh child, the only boy following the birth of six girls—I know you expected Beauty to be a girl, but that wasn't the case.

In my time, girls were sent off to get married at the age of seventeen, while boys had to grow up into courageous men. My father, the king of the land, always wanted a boy who would soon become a prince and join him in his endless voyages at sea.

Unlike our neighbors in the Kingdom of Sorrow, we lived in peace, and our royal family's main interest was exploring the world. My father was a

descendant of Christopher Columbus, who had discovered many regions of the world, including the Kingdom of Sorrow.

For personal reasons, I shall not name my kingdom: my family's, or mine. I don't know who might read this diary, and I can't risk it ending up in the hands of those who have learned the dark arts and know about the power of real names.

Unfortunate for my father, I wasn't interested in traveling like he had hoped. I had no interest in the sea or my father's voyages, because I had an infatuation with books. My father didn't like that, because his voyages weren't only explorations. Our kingdom benefited immensely from the trades and the goods his ships brought to it. He was worried that if I didn't develop a liking for the sea, he couldn't pass his sailing skills onto me. I didn't understand at that time that I would be my kingdom's only hope if my father died.

"Don't you want to join your father in his voyages? Don't you want to be like the great Christopher Columbus?" my lovely mother asked me, while I was yawning next to a pile of vellums I had bought at expensive prices. I collected books that were only written once, and were never copied, thinking that I could gain exclusive knowledge that no one else had. I wanted to learn how to turn copper into gold, and about magic, which was forbidden in our kingdom.

"I hate the sea," I said. "Why should it be of any interest to me? Is it because I am the only boy?"

"Well, your interests are rather strange, my son," my mother said. "Boys don't usually become bookworms. If it was one of your sisters, I would have accepted it."

Ironically, none of my sisters read a single book. They had one thing on their minds: to get married before they reached the age of twenty-one, probably to another prince, and it would've been a bonus if he were charming.

"The things I can learn from these books are much better than my father's voyages across the ocean, risking his life to make money," I

explained to her. “I could make gold, Mother. Gold! And we’d never have to sail ships across the oceans to make a fortune again.”

“Gold? How?” she asked. “People dig and find gold, my son. No one makes it.”

I knew that she wouldn’t understand, and I didn’t want her to know that I was into alchemy, which was prohibited, the same way as rolling a dice. It was thought of as a work of the devil.

“As you wish, my son.” She shook her head and limped away, out of the room. My mother had been ill for years with one leg slightly shorter than the other. My grandmother told me that my mother was darkly enchanted by someone who hated her. I was eleven when my grandmother divulged this information to me. No one else ever told me how it happened, and I wasn’t allowed to ask.

One of the reasons my father loved to sail was that he wished to find a cure for her somewhere far away. Funny how we always look for the cures of our sorrows in distant places, while the pain is right here where we stand.

I could heal you, Mother. I could heal you. Forget about my father’s old-fashioned ways, crossing the oceans with his ships to find what isn’t there. With alchemy, I could heal you within seconds. If I could only find the Forbidden Rose, a red flower that heals everything. It’s written here in my books.

“And shouldn’t you go out and mingle with others your age?” my mother asked with caring eyes. “You’re sixteen now. Shouldn’t you look for a girl, and make her your wife many years from now? You’re a beautiful young man.”

I had always heard this phrase, and it was true. I was a beautiful boy; so beautiful that other families begged my father to have me marry their daughters. One of the girls cut her fingers accidentally one day when she was peeling an apple while looking at me. I was more beautiful than my sisters were. I didn’t know what that meant, other than having a number of male enemies, and endless female admirers. Thanks to my mother, I had her fabulous genes. She was the most beautiful of all, if only her leg wasn’t

causing her pain and embarrassment. The one who had enchanted my mother must have envied her beauty.

Days passed and my interest in girls never peaked. It was books, books, and more books, trying to find the cure for my mother. Alchemy was the key, and I wasn't into those frauds like Nicolas Flammel and their kind. I was collecting books from the source, from where alchemy started: from Persia. That was when I asked my father to shower me with books when he visited Persia, but he rarely did.

I didn't care about Romans, Greeks, or Egyptians. I only wanted the secrets found in the Persian books. The secrets that could make me rich without having to travel or work hard like my father, and the secrets that could end my mother's pain and truly make her the most beautiful in the land. Beauty had to be perfect. A beautiful face wasn't enough. I had to heal her leg.

"Your father's late," my mother told me several months later. "He's been to Transylvania, and he usually gets back within two months. It's been three now."

I didn't know what to do or say, hating how she looked when she was worried. How strange was it that a beautiful face turned into an ugly one by only moving a few muscles? How thin was the line between beautiful and ugly, between a beauty and a beast?

A week later, the sad news came knocking on our door. My father's ship, the Demeter, had sunk in the sea. Although my mother and sisters cried and whined, I listened to the details and facts about the incident. It was rumored that there was a coffin on the ship, one that held the corpse of a Count Dracula. For some reason, this coffin was of great importance, and would've made us richer if it hadn't sunk with the ship's crew. It was said that the corpse of Count Dracula came alive and killed everyone on the ship, before it sank. It was a myth the sailors kept reciting for years after the incident.

The aftermath of my father's death was that we were about to become a poorer kingdom. There was no one who could do my father's job properly. And his crew, whom he had trained, died with him at the sea.

I had to step up, bury my alchemy dreams, and grow up into a man and sail away to save the day.

I was told that there was one last voyage I had to make on my father's behalf—a first voyage for me. My father had planned the voyage before his death, and wrote about it in his own diary that he kept in the safety of my mother's hands. I followed the instructions and had the ship built he had designed in the diary. Then I sought after the best sailors left to decipher the map I had found with the diary, explaining our destination. The map pointed to a place that was considered a myth. Sailors loved to call it Neverland because no one ever found it. It was a region only my father knew about, or at least believed in. In his diary, he said that I could save my family, and the kingdom, if I brought the finest food and merchandise from Neverland, and traded it with neighboring kingdoms. I was supposed to look for a boy called Peter Pan once I arrived.

I packed all my books, brought them aboard, and sailed with a newly trained crew. The sea wasn't an easy place to be. I got sick every other day, and I couldn't read my books. It wasn't too bad, though. I just had to be strong until I reached our destination.

We never reached Neverland.

A pirate ship named Jolly Roger attacked us, led by a man with a hook instead of a hand. He hijacked our ship, and threatened to kill us if we disobeyed him and refused to be enslaved.

Abandoning my books, I escaped, swimming away. Six days and seven nights clinging to a log in the sea, until I reached a shore.

Lost and hungry, I walked through endless forests with no one in sight, until I saw a sign, carved in wood. It said:

Welcome to the castle East of the Sun, West of the Moon.

Things must be loved before they are lovely.

Suddenly, there was a castle right in front of me. I didn't know whether I had missed seeing it while approaching, or if it just appeared out of

nowhere.

The castle almost called to me, as if it had a soul or knew me from long ago. Before I was even born, even before the world was born. On my knees, I pounded on its enormous gate and shouted through its bars, asking if there was anyone there to help me before I starved to death—I had only saved one book from the ship, and the stories about the Forbidden Rose in it kept me company when I was hungry. I admit that I was about to literally chew on some pages on my way, cannibalizing words that had only been written once. But I had steered away from the thought, because I believed that the origins of things had to be kept intact.

I looked at the gates of the castle as they squeaked open on their own.

Did the castle decide I was worthy of saving? Or torturing? I didn't know. Hunger blinded my judgment as I stepped into the echoing halls of the unknown.

This was when my real story—a fairy tale to you—began.

Although the castle looked old and abandoned from the outside, it shone like a golden treasure from the inside. Everything I saw glittered; everything I heard echoed; and everything I touched, I smeared with dirt, for my hands were filthy, having had a long journey.

"Hello?" I called out, craning my neck up at the chandeliers that waved slightly over my head, back and forth, as if the castle was a cradle rocked slightly by the hands of evil.

I was a beautiful boy, but not fool enough to miss the menacing heart of evil drumming underneath the marble floors, hiding in the echoing walls, and crouching underneath glittering artifacts. My father had told me enough scary stories to recognize darkness when I confronted it, even in the brightest of lights. I remembered trying to sleep with my eyes open after those bedtime stories.

I had to wait and listen to my voice echoing seven times before I could call out for the castle's inhabitants again, but then I realized that there was no need. The echo had done that on my behalf.

I noticed that there were no mirrors in the castle, and when I approached a glittering plate and lifted it to my face, it did not show my reflection. Such items had to be bewitched by evil spells. I read about them in the alchemy books, that these were only found in places inhabited by demons or evil spirits, which feared their own image.

Clutching the book in my hand, I decided I should leave, feeling frustrated, and blaming myself for being a useless young man who had lost his way in life. I could not find the Forbidden Rose to heal my mother in the tens of books I read, nor did I listen to my father and learn how to sail a ship, which nearly caused me to meet his same fate.

Was I being punished for my adolescent stubbornness? But I had always thought of myself as a good person. How couldn't I, when I was such a beautiful and desired boy? Didn't beauty equal good? Was it not a cosmic rule that ugliness equaled evil?

Strangely enough that day, I didn't leave the castle, although I should have. Something made me stay.

It wasn't the walls that echoed, the furniture that glittered, or the faint music that hummed underneath my feet. It was the smell of food. I was starving, and the castle seduced me with the most primitive human need.

I turned around, looking for the smell's source. I walked on toes like a sleepwalking princess, raising my nose up, closing my eyes, and imagining the smell of fresh food dancing like an Arabian snake in front of my eyes, guiding me to Sesame, Ali Baba's cave. I told you I read a lot, and I couldn't help but compare stories I read to real-life incidents.

I stopped at a great hall with a long table full of food, of all kinds, and all colors, curving up and down like beautiful mountains in a dream. There was enough food to last me a year. It was fresh and warm.

But I didn't care. I dipped into the soup, sank my teeth into the meat, and drank the delicious wine.

Strangely, everything tasted of flowers somehow. Still, I didn't care.

After I ate the delicious food—which was even better than my mom's—I felt heavy, and sat on one of the huge gold-plated chairs. I sighed and

imagined myself returning home with something precious to save my father's kingdom, something that proved I wasn't a loser. The thought reminded me of the tales I read about princesses lost in the woods after being banished by their evil stepmothers. The princesses usually ended up finding a castle of some sort where they met a prince charming who kissed them, and then the story ended—I always wanted to know what happened after that, but historians and fairy tale collectors never cared for my opinion.

But I wasn't a princess. I was a boy. This story felt wrong to me, and I didn't know why. There was no princess in this castle, too. It was just me with the endless food, and probably some ancient ghosts waiting for me to sell my soul to them.

Something outside the castle's windows grabbed my attention all of a sudden. It was something red, and although it was small, single, and was left alone against the windy weather outside, it stood against all odds. I jumped off my chair and ran toward it. Standing at the threshold of the castle's main door, I saw a little creature of nature standing there. I was right. It was a Forbidden Rose. The only Forbidden Rose I had ever seen.

I checked the alchemy book in my hand and compared the picture of that to what I saw before my eyes. They matched. I shrugged in an attempt to calm myself down. I wasn't a loser after all. I did find the rose that was going to cure my mother. All I had to do was step outside and grab it…

Unfortunately, the castle's heavy door slammed shut before me, followed by the windows and every other opening. I wasn't scared yet, but now there was no way out. A whirling wind at my back forced me to turn around to see what caused this. It was a beast, and it was a she.

She was the most hideous creature. Looking at her deformed face, hunched shoulders, and large, hairy feet, I was disgusted more than appalled. She wore an expensive dress, but it was ripped in places to give way to the protruding parts of her irregular body. I sensed that she was younger than me, although it puzzled me how I got that impression.

She stood with her dirty blonde hair dangling before her face. Then she parted her hair with her hands, and made way for her eyes. I noticed she

wore a diamond ring on one hand. Her eyes were pitch-black, like a demon's.

I turned back, pounding on the door, knowing that there was no one outside who could hear me. I tried to break the glass but failed. Was it under a spell? As I looked outside through the glass, I saw other plants next to the Forbidden Rose acting in a strange way. They were bending awkwardly and dying on their own, as if hit with an abrupt plague. But that wasn't the case. They were dying because of the beast. Whenever she approached a living thing, it died or aged instantly. I was lucky to still be alive. Why wasn't I affected like the plants?

Turning back, I saw that everything that glittered dimmed when she walked by, candles flickered away, and with every step she took, the floor underneath her turned to ashes. I didn't know what to do. I was a beautiful boy about to be killed by a beastly girl in the middle of nowhere.

I could've talked to her, or begged her to spare my life, but my tongue was tied. The thought of grabbing a spell out of my book of alchemy crossed my mind, but my hands gave up on me and the book fell, thudding against the ashen floor.

Her black eyes kept staring at me, blazing with anger. Since she hadn't hurt me, I expected her to speak. How did a beast like her sound? Was her voice as scary as she looked?

She approached me. I closed my eyes, unable to imagine being so close to saving my mother and yet failing.

Goodbye, world. I'm a failure. I was stubborn, not listening to my father, only believing in those damn alchemy books. What use were they, when they couldn't save me from the beast that guarded the Forbidden Rose?

Suddenly, I heard distant voices approaching: men shouting and cursing outside the castle. I opened my eyes and looked outside. There were tens of them, with stakes, guns, and torches in their hands. I thought they were the locals of a neighboring town. Anger shone on their faces as they approached, shouting, "Come out, ugly beast!"

They were here for the beast that stood behind me. I pounded on the unbreakable window, hoping they'd hear me before she killed me.

"Come out, beast! Today is your judgment day."

One of the older men in the gathering saw and pointed at me. They came running, attempting to break the window, but failed.

Everything that the beast had sealed in the castle was unbreakable. When she approached to show herself through the window, they swallowed hard, then gritted their teeth, trying their best to stand tall, not showing fear.

Turning around again, I saw her behind me, much closer now, still staring with black eyes shining from between thick blonde hair. I noticed trickles of dried blood on her hair, and I wondered about what kind of scary face she hid underneath.

She pulled me with one hand and threw me away against a wall, then gestured with open palms for the doors to open wide and let her chasers inside through fluttering curtains. They took the bait, and came running into the castle with their torches and stakes.

That was a big mistake.

She could levitate—not enough to fly, but enough to kill and silence her enemies. She had strong hands, and she could kill with them, twisting necks and slicing through a man's body like a knife. She was unapologetic in her killing, and she was more angry than scary. It was as if she blamed them for something—as if she thought of them as beasts, too.

When she was finished with her little massacre, she threw the bodies outside onto the earth in which the Forbidden Rose was planted. The earth drank the men's blood and fed the plants.

Thinking of it now, I could've run while the doors were open, and I still don't know why I didn't. Was I too paralyzed and scared, or was it that something about her made me curious?

After the doors slammed shut again, she walked toward me, her big feet heavy like a troll's, clutching the ashes her footsteps left behind. She pulled

me by my hair, and I slid helplessly with my back against the floor. I tried to free myself, but she was too strong.

Finally, she threw me into another room and started eyeing me again. It would've been better if she had killed me, instead of bestowing her evil eyes upon me.

I watched as she pulled out animal skin from a closet and wrote on it with darkened ink that I hoped wasn't the blood of her victims. She handed me the skin, and wanted me to read what she had written on it.

Puzzled, I took the skin and wondered if the beast was mute.

You were about to kill my rose, she wrote. Why would you do that?

I stared back at her with widened eyes, wondering why this was her biggest concern. But who was I to argue with the beast who had spared me so far?

"It's the Forbidden Rose," I said to her. "I need it to cure my mother."

It's precious to me, and everything comes with a price in this world. What would you pay for it? she wrote on another animal skin. I was beginning to feel safer, since this had turned into a conversation instead of a bloodbath. Again, I was pleased that we were bargaining. I thought I would bargain for my life, but she'd spared it already without me knowing why. Did it matter why I was still alive? Of course it didn't. We take advantage of such things like being alive, rarely bothering if there is reason to it at all. Only if we die, or are threatened with death, do we question and whine about how all this time we wasted the gift of living.

"I'd pay anything," I said. "It's for my mother. If I heal her, I will not only make her happy and proud of me—and probably my father, too, in his grave—but I will make peace with myself, knowing that I wasn't a complete failure as her son."

Is your mother as beautiful as you? the beast wrote, not mentioning the price anymore.

"Much, much—" I was enthusiastic to say more, but it occurred to me that I was talking to a beast. I didn't want to talk to her about beauty she did

not possess—far from it. “Not so much,” I lied. “She is an average woman, really,” I said, not wanting to either hurt the beast’s feelings, or tickle her anger.

For a beautiful boy like you, she wrote, I’d give you the rose to heal your mother… if you marry me.

I was stunned. That was straightforward—her words almost cut through me.

It was one of those times when I felt that my beauty was a curse. If I had been the kind of boy who accepted the many advances girls made in the past, it might have made sense to submit to the beast and save my mother. But I was only a beautiful boy who preferred books over girls.

The Forbidden Rose will not only heal your mother. It will also gift her with immortality, the beast wrote. At least her handwriting was beautiful.

“If that’s so, why didn’t you use it to heal yourself?” I asked, lowering my head a little so she didn’t get furious.

There was a long moment of silence, the calm before the storm, and I knew I must have insulted her.

The rose can’t cure me, the beast wrote. It amazed me that she confessed that her bestiality was part of an illness or something. My cure is almost priceless.

I didn’t want to elaborate, asking what she was, and what it was that could cure her. The image of my mother smiling and running in green fields with two equally long legs shaded my judgment. I decided I would do it for my mother. I would waste my beauty and youth for her, and it amazed me how good it felt. How so, when I was giving in to this horrendous beast? I experienced the enchanting feeling of sacrifice for the first time. It had that bittersweet taste. How did sacrificing yourself for someone you love bring so much joy? That wasn’t a feeling I read about in books.

I agreed to the beast’s offer: enslaving myself with her in the castle, wasting my youth, shattering my dreams of becoming what I wanted, all in the name of the vague word called “marriage.” I knew why the beast wanted to marry me. She wanted my beauty, even if she ended up torturing

me for it. What was the most important thing a beast lacked, but beauty? That's why they always walked side by side, a beauty and a beast; one had succeeded in enslaving or taming the other.

In the coming days, I figured out how to postpone my agreement to marry her. She had forbidden me from entering any of the rooms on the first floor. Each night, I breached one of the several rooms so she would get mad at me and punish me. Thus, the marriage was postponed. Her punishment was cruel and gruesome, but sweet on my body, knowing it was in exchange for not marrying her. The more she punished me, the less I sympathized with her. Such an ugly, vicious beast I didn't care for.

Still, she astonished me that there was a rule to her torture. She wouldn't harm my beautiful face. The scars filled my body, though. I was her boy toy; one her goblin father and monster mother never bought her—that's if she had a father and mother.

At night, she chained me to a luxurious bed in a room next to her room. Although I was in no way capable of escaping the wicked castle, she'd thought that chaining me would make me marry her eventually. I tried to escape several times, but I never succeeded. No door or window opened against her will, and my book of alchemy proved useless against her darkly enchanted castle. Negotiating with her was tiring as well. I wasn't sure if she was mute, but she still never talked to me, only using animal skin to write on.

The beast had some taste for music, though; a certain kind of music that reminded me of ballroom dancing. It was good music, aristocratic, and it filled the castle all night, humming gently out of the walls. The music helped me sleep against the pain every night.

It helped me dream…

In my dreams, a beautiful girl showed up repeatedly. She had blonde, curly locks and walked through a garden full of Forbidden Roses under a rainbow. Her curly hair fluttered in a summer breeze, as she approached me with the most beautiful smile. Her beauty was so eminent that it lessened the perception of my own beauty. She kept advancing toward me, and by the end of the dream, the girl whispered in my ear, "Things must be loved before they are lovely."

Then I woke up, sweating, staring at the beast that had captured me. She reminded me that there were no beautiful girls for me in this real life. It was just my mind playing tricks on me.

The beast started lavishing me with expensive clothing, as if I was a bride, and she my promised husband. Then, when I refused whatever she offered me, she tortured me. She also enjoyed having dinner with me, watching me eat.

She never ate in front of me. When I asked why, she wrote that she was afraid that if I saw her eating, I'd be disgusted with her and wouldn't marry her. Later, I caught her eating a tarantula. Some marriage proposal, that was.

Do you think you could love me? she once wrote over dinner.

"Not in a million years," I said. She had tortured me enough that I wasn't afraid to speak the truth. Torture was so hard to tolerate in the beginning. But later, it tasted like a bitter memory that stuck with me forever. It was always painful to remember, but no longer surprising or shocking.

That's all right, she wrote. It will take some time. I don't know what love is, so I can't claim I'd be missing it if you didn't. I just want to look at you every night, and wish you to keep me company.

"How do you expect me to marry you, when I don't know much about you?" I thought it was a good time to learn more about her. If I had learned anything from the books I read, it was that people's weaknesses could be spotted through their speeches. You just had to listen carefully and read between the lines. In all of the fairy tales my father told me, the villain always had to make a speech.

There isn't much to know about me. I'm a beast. I do horrible things, and I enjoy it. No amount of things you know about me will make you sympathize with me. You have to like me for who I am, she wrote, picking up a beetle from a small box and munching on it.

I didn't know whether to laugh or throw up, but I knew one thing: she was a smart beast. She talked with reason, but how was I supposed to like her for what she was?

"Were you born a beast?" I asked.

She stopped in the middle of a bite, and threw whatever was left of the insect away—the legs, probably. Her eyes blackened again, but she sat still, not picking up a skin to write on. Apparently, she wasn't going to answer this.

"I am sorry," I said. "It seems you don't want to talk about it. How about if I ask you about my mother? You said you would show me evidence that she has received the rose and was cured. Without that, what would be the point in marrying you?"

Really? she wrote. Are you going to marry me?

"Let's talk about my mother first."

That's fine. I'll keep my promise, she wrote. But you have to promise me that you will do as I say. You have to promise me that you will not do something foolish.

"Why would I do something foolish?"

You just promise me! Her handwriting wasn't as beautiful as it was before. It was scribbled, and looked nasty.

I agreed and followed her through the castle, to the rooms she had warned me about entering on the first floor. I walked slowly, two or three strides away from her. Everywhere she walked, things dimmed or died. All but me. I was still safe from her curse.

She stopped in front of one of the rooms and showed me in, while standing at the threshold.

This is a forbidden room, she wrote. No one's supposed to enter it.

"No one? Not even you?" I asked.

Not even me. I don't enter it. It's enchanted in ways I can't explain.

"So why are you showing me in?"

Because you want proof that your mother is healed, and only mirrors have the power of showing you what's happening in faraway lands without having to travel. You must have noticed that there are no mirrors in the castle. I hate them.

“So?”

There’s a mirror in this room, though, she wrote. Ask it about your mother, and it will show you she’s safe. You don’t ask the mirror anything else. Understood? Not one other thing. You must promise me.

I nodded and entered alone, as she closed the door behind me.

The mirror inside the room was blackened and had no reflection. What kind of mirror was that?

There was nothing special about the room itself.

“Mirror?” I asked it, lowering my head, and thinking I was insane.

No answer.

“Mirror?” I repeated.

This time it shone slowly from dark to light, with a rippling surface, showing my beautiful face in its reflection. With all the madness I had been through, I wasn’t surprised, and I remembered reading about such mirrors in books.

“Could you show me my mother? Could you show me if she was cured?”

The mirror’s surface rippled and showed me my family’s castle in our kingdom, and then it showed me my mother. She looked beautiful and healthy, walking in the green gardens outside while ruling the kingdom. Seeing her brought a long smile on my face. She was cured.

“How do I know you’re telling me the truth?” I asked the mirror.

“No one in this castle knows what your mother looks like,” a girl in the mirror said. I could only hear her voice, not see her face. “If I wanted to trick you, how would I be able to conjure the image of someone I’ve never seen?”

It wasn’t the most convincing explanation, but it proved the mirror could speak to me, so I knelt down and whispered to the mirror, keeping my eyes on the closed door separating me from the beast.

“Do you know how I could escape this place?”

“You can’t escape this place…” the girl in the mirror said, and then stopped without saying more.

Was that it? Was I destined to stay trapped with the beast forever?

“…unless your heart changes,” the girl in the mirror continued.

“What does that even mean?”

“How could you expect to leave if you haven’t changed?” she said. “How do you expect to advance in life if you don’t learn from your challenges?”

“I don’t understand. Change how?” I decided to go on with the insanity and actually ask.

“Ask the girl in your dreams,” the mirror said. I felt my heart racing. How did the mirror know about the girl in my dreams? “She is trying to help you.”

The beast knocked on the door.

“Just a minute, I’m on my way out,” I said to the beast, and leaned closer to the mirror. “Why can’t the beast enter this room?” I whispered, but I was too late. It had gone black again—after hearing the beast’s voice, I assumed.

The rest of the day, I did everything the beast asked of me. I just wanted the sun to set, so I could go to sleep and dream about the beautiful girl that could help me escape.

While I was chained, dreaming about the girl, she seemed too real to me. Too beautiful, wearing a white dress with pink flowers. Her blonde hair was braided on both sides, glittering in the sun. Tiny white birds flew around her, celebrating her youth and beauty.

I followed her wherever she went, walking into cornfields, and then ending up before a simple house. Unlike what I had imagined, she wasn’t a princess. She was a merchant’s daughter living in a secluded farmhouse. They were the kind of people who lived the real happily-ever-afters. They didn’t need crowns, enchantments, fairy tales, or too much beauty. They had each other, a family of five: her father, her mother, she, and her two sisters. I wondered if this was the true beauty I should have aspired to.

The girl signaled for me to follow her in the house. I discovered that no one could see me in the dream but her. I watched her kiss her parents, and play with her two sisters before dinner.

Everything happened fast in the dream, as if she only wanted to show me precise things, enough to know about her. I was patient and I didn't interfere with what I saw. I was here to learn how to change, whatever that meant.

A messenger came knocking on their door in the dream, inviting the girl to the Queen of Sorrow's castle. So this girl lived in the Kingdom of Sorrow?

The messenger said that the Queen offered young girls the opportunity to make money by working for her in the castle. The queen also promised to teach the girls the etiquettes of princesses, and shower them with gifts when their work ended.

The girl didn't really have to go. Her family was neither rich nor poor. But all young girls seemed infatuated with the Queen of Sorrow, the young queen of the land. Even her mother and her two little sisters were fond of the Queen. The father was reluctant, but couldn't deny his daughter's desire to go work for the Queen, whom she described as the beauty of all beauties.

I saw her welcome the messenger and debate with her mother about which dress to wear when visiting the palace. They couldn't stop talking about the Queen's beauty and elegance. They had heard about the Queen inviting young beautiful girls to visit her castle before, but they never thought she'd choose the girl.

"What's your name?" I whispered to the girl, still wondering how her mother didn't see me.

She blinked at me, then shushed me away behind her mother's back. I understood that I was here only to watch, not to ask questions in this dream, so I obeyed. All I wanted was to know how to change like the mirror said, so I could free myself from the beast.

I followed the girl as she rode in the coach to the Queen's castle, which they called the Schloss, an old Germanic name for "castle." The coach was

black and it looked like it was made from bones, but the girl didn't see that. She even claimed it was gold. I guess I saw in different colors in this world. Then she talked to the coachman, who was actually a wolf, but she saw him as a man, and called him Managarm. I was sure that I saw things differently from her now, but I concentrated on what I should learn from this dream. Who said we all would see the same dream the same way?

Back to the castle…

It would take me about two long diaries to describe the magical ride and the castle itself, and I'm sure others will do a better job of it than me in their diaries. What matters now is what happened in the castle…

Tens of girls lined up on both sides, welcoming the Queen of Sorrow passing through to her throne. The Queen walked on a red carpet made of the finest fabric I had ever seen, and the throne that awaited her was made of glass that looked like precious pearls from afar. The castle's ceiling was so high it was absurd, filled with golden paintings on a sky-blue background, as if the delicate threads were sewn to the real sky. I heard the girls talking about the Queen's throne being placed at a certain point in the castle on purpose. It wasn't haphazardly chosen. There were tiny holes in the ceiling that made the sun shine directly on the Queen's face every day while sitting on her throne, right at noon. The Queen used that single ray of sunlight to enhance the skin on her arms and face. If the Queen desired the sun to settle on that spot on any other hour of the day, the servant closed certain openings and left others to match the angle of the sun's changing positions.

The Queen herself didn't need so much sun on her face, in my opinion. She was as beautiful as queens were supposed to be, and she might have surpassed those expectations too. Her beauty was indescribable. She was as beautiful as dreams that never came true because they were too fabulous to be real. Her attractiveness wasn't all beauty, though. There was something dangerously enchanting about her. I couldn't put my finger on it. She reminded me of the bright and beautiful light that burned the moths and butterflies.

I had to force my eyes away from the Queen's attractive looks to concentrate on the nameless girl I was following. The girl knelt, among

others, on one knee and bowed for the Queen who knelt for no one; she didn't even lower herself one bit, but the girls worshipped her nonetheless. They wondered if they would ever be like her, talk like her, walk gracefully like her, and if one day they could ever have other girls bend on their knees for them like they did for her.

Again, I'm sure the Queen is going to be mentioned in countless diaries, so I'll skip to the important—and shocking—ending of this once-beautiful dream.

At some moment, the Queen consulted a large mirror held by two strong male servants next to her throne. The mirror seemed heavy, and the men holding it looked worried about what they held in their hands. I couldn't see who was talking to the Queen from the mirror, but that didn't matter. What mattered was what happened when the queen stood up.

The lovely Queen, the godmother of most girls in Sorrow, turned into a beast on her own terms—still looking as beautiful as ever, though.

The Queen walked down the carpet, and the girls on both sides stared at her. Her chin was still up as she lifted her hands in a majestic way, and chanted strange words as she walked. It was a song, a lullaby; so sweet, yet so deadly, I had never heard anything like it before. I felt dizzy hearing it, but what happened to the girls was much worse.

The girls fainted and piled down one by one next to her like dying plants, bending down to the floor. Some of them gave in silently, and others throbbed like a fish out of water before they gave in eventually. The beautiful Queen was like a plague, killing everything she passed.

She reminded me of the beast that had captured me outside of this dream, except that one of them was a beauty and the other was a beast.

Servants began collecting the girls in glass coffins and sending them to a secret chamber, which turned out to be a large bathhouse. What was a better place to have a bloodbath but a bathhouse?

But the dream prevented me from accessing the bathhouse. The dream had powers over me; I couldn't wander wherever I wanted. The girl who had ushered me here was in a glass coffin half filled with water and floating

roses, just like all the other girls, taken inside the bathhouse, where I started hearing screams.

“You know all you need now,” the beautiful girl said from behind me, taking a ghost form. We weren’t in the castle anymore. We were in some neverwhere, those places in dreams when you know you are about to wake up soon.

“You’re dead?” I asked.

“Not exactly,” she said. “I can’t explain, and you don’t need to know more. I want you to free me so you change, and then you can free yourself.”

“I’m confused,” I said. “What do you want me to do, and what does this have to do with me escaping the beast?”

“To escape the castle, you need to free me from the dream I’m trapped in,” she said. “This isn’t just any castle. It’s like a world all itself. It has been here since the beginning of time, and it’s everywhere. It has no address, and changes place from century to century. Did you see any signs on your way to it?”

It took me a moment to remember. “Yes. It said, ‘East of the Moon and West of the Sun.’”

“No. It should say, ‘East of the Sun and West of the Moon,’” the girl explained.

“Does it even matter?” I laughed. “It’s not like it is a real address.”

“You said it yourself. It’s not a real address. Don’t you understand? This castle is evil. I bet it is what caused you to get lost somewhere, whether land or sea. It has planned everything to bring you here. It does it all the time. It washes away people’s minds and lets them think it has been here since the day they were born, until it takes what it wants.”

“What does it want?”

“I can’t say, and even though you know, you can’t say it either.”

“What kind of puzzle is this?” I started losing my patience. “This is so confusing, and I don’t care about all of this. All I want to know is how I can free you, so I can leave it,” I said.

“To do so, you have to tame the beast that holds you prisoner. You tame her, you free me and yourself.”

“Is that it? Is that the only way out of here? To tame the beast?”

“Yes.”

I wondered why she didn’t just say so from the beginning, but I was in no position to argue. “How can I tame her?” I asked. “She chains me to the bed every night, and she tortures me. How do you tame a beast?”

“Find beauty in her, and you tame her,” the girl said. “It might sound unreasonable, but I’m giving you the key to set yourself free.”

“How am I supposed to find beauty in her when she is an ugly beast?” I asked.

“Things have to be loved before they’re lovely,” the girl said, that damned phrase, and gave me no chance for further discussion.

I woke up.

The next day, I sat at the long dining table in front of the beast, trying to enjoy my delicious food as she ate a beetle, a spider, and then started to have a frog for dessert, I presumed—she poured cinnamon and sugar on it as it wiggled its feet before being eaten alive. The beast croaked momentarily after swallowing it, instead of burping. I had never eaten a live frog before, so maybe this was what naturally happened after eating them.

How was I supposed to see beauty in her? How was I supposed to get close to the beast?

I cracked my knuckles and cleared my throat, reminding myself that I had little experience with girls, wasting my life reading alchemy books about magic that couldn’t save the day when I needed it.

“Hmm…” I coughed, wiping my mouth with the finest fabric, but it seemed to take her attention away from the frog’s dead legs for now. “I

meant to ask you something," I said.

She nodded at me, not bothering to write on the animal skin, as sticky green stuff drooled from her lips.

"What's your name?" I asked. It was the best I could come up with. It occurred to me that to know people, to bond with them, their names were a good start.

The beast threw away whatever she was munching on, raising her eyes to me. Although disfigured, something shone in them. I wasn't sure what it meant when black eyes shone, though. Did I say something wrong?

"I'm sorry." I shrugged. "I didn't mean to—"

She grabbed her animal skin instantly, wrote on it, and jumped off her chair and walked to me, showing me her name.

It was Villeneuve.

Villeneuve? How peculiar, I thought. It sounded like "villain," but the "neuve" part made it sound fine and sweet.

When I spelled her name on my lips, her eyes shone brighter, evading the black, and turning into a pale shade of blue. She tilted her head when hearing her name, and kept gazing at me as if she wanted to kiss me–-something I didn't want to do.

"It's a lovely name," I said, nodding, and I wasn't lying.

She amazed me by holding one of my hands between hers. How could this be the torturous beast I knew? The girl in my dreams was right. This looked like my way out. But what now? Should I just ask her to let me go? I didn't think she would yet. The best thing was to continue playing the game.

"I noticed you like music," I offered. "Some ballroom music, I presume. It really helps me to sleep at night."

She nodded, kneeling down next to me. Suddenly, I was talking to a pet, which also had the power to chop off my head.

“You like to dance?” I asked, not expecting her to say yes, but she shook her head with approval. She clapped her hands, and the music started to play in the castle. I noticed that things didn’t die or turn into ashes around her when she was close to me. Well, a couple of plants still died nearby, but the effect had lessened.

She pulled me up and held me closer, and we started to dance…

I didn’t say a word, but she was a good dancer—a little too powerful in her moves, though. I had to make an effort so I didn’t end up under her feet, squashed like the frog she had just devoured.

The more we danced in the vast castle, the more her face eased, still disfigured and ugly, but with some kind of happy soul shining through.

We kept dancing and dancing, until I became exhausted. I couldn’t fake being a happy prisoner any longer, and had to ask her to stop dancing.

I ended up punished and chained to my bed again. The beast’s rage was overwhelming, and I started to think that it wasn’t a good idea anymore to try to tame the beast.

To make things worse, the girl in my dreams disappeared. She didn’t show up when I slept. Was that it? She just showed me how to do it, and I couldn’t discuss it with her again?

The next day, I made sure to say good morning to Villeneuve, and call her by her name, which she still liked. I had practiced my broad smile all night, so she couldn’t interpret it as fake. I was a beautiful boy—a girl had cut her finger accidentally once when looking at me—so it wasn’t that hard to seduce the beast.

I was amazed by her girly attitude, sitting upright in the chair. She had combed her stiffened hair that looked once like a broom’s. Well, she combed it in her own fashion, and she wore a pink dress. She had even brought a fork and a knife to chop up something on her plate. We both knew she wasn’t eating pancakes. It was a rat. I imagined that she thought it would be less disgusting for me. She had cooked it in a good manner, though, at least making it look like the kind of meat normal people eat at dinner tables.

Then something stranger happened…

“Good morning to you too,” she said in an awful, beastly voice. I knew her intentions were good, so I imagined birds humming to me in my ears.

“You can talk?” I asked.

“I was afraid that when you heard my voice, you wouldn’t like me,” she said.

“Oh.” I almost choked on my food. I didn’t know why I imagined her insisting on letting me taste part of her rat at that moment, but that never happened.

“I know that I have a terrible voice, but it’s my voice.”

It wasn’t terrible. It was horrible, as if made of the sum of all children’s nightmares—as if it was an ensemble of creaking doors, donkey voices, and croaking frogs. I couldn’t tell her that. Nor could I tell her that her voice was so sweet I wondered why she never sang to me. She would know I was lying. Sometimes silence was the best way out of situations like these.

“You really should’ve let me hear your voice a long time ago,” I said. “We’re closer now. We should know everything about each other.”

She blushed… in her own beastly way.

We spent the following days dancing, talking, and getting to know each other. One thing she refused to talk about was who she was or where she came from, and she definitely hated anything that had to do with mirrors, even if it was a fairy tale.

Occasionally, she let me watch my mother through the mirror, but left the door open so I couldn’t talk to it privately. What mattered was that my mother was doing great, healing, and becoming healthier every day. Little did my mother know that she’d become immortal, and it tore my heart whenever I watched her pray to the Lord to bring me back. She still believed that I was alive. I was looking forward to the day I got back to her and could recount my beastly, yet magical, journey.

The beast began to let me sleep unchained. She even offered to sleep next to me, but I persuaded her that wouldn’t be appropriate before marriage. It

made her even happier.

Then one day, she showed me to a secret library in the castle. It was huge, but strange indeed. Wherever I stood, I saw shelves stacked with an infinite amount of books. But if I changed my place and stood elsewhere, I saw different shelves with different books. It was as if the library was a huge maze. To get what you wanted, you needed to know where to stand. It was a puzzle of placements and orientation. The situation reminded me of what the girl in my dreams had said. The castle was an evil place, unbound by time or place. It was East of the Sun and West of the Moon, wasn't it?

"I thought I'd show you the library, since I've seen you like books," she said. "I am sure you will read all the fairy tales you like here. Consider it my wedding present to you."

"But this is crazy. How can I find what I'm looking for? I could waste my life in here without knowing it, discovering those invisible shelves."

"I know." Villeneuve nodded. "I love books. I spent my life reading in here."

Even the beast was a bookworm like me. At this point, I was still resisting the idea that I had grown to like her a lot. The dances, her shyness, and being an avid reader; it made her bestiality irrelevant at times. I didn't know how to explain that feeling—connecting with someone on a basis beyond our looks, or where we come from. But then again, I was raised on books, and they shaped my adolescence before I was thrown into the sea. Books that allowed me to live in faraway places, pretending to be a hero in a fairy land, all this while I was still in my place, staring into the pages.

But no, she's still a beast, and I am too beautiful to end up with her. Too damn beautiful.

Suddenly, I remembered what the girl in my dreams had said: "Things must be loved before they are lovely." I still didn't know what this meant, although I began to have an idea, and I didn't like it.

"I like books, too," I said. "I might spend some time in the library, if you don't mind."

"I'm glad you like it, but I have to warn you," she said.

“Of what?”

“There is this girl.” Villeneuve sounded hesitant. “She looks beautiful, but she is not to be trusted.”

“What girl?”

“She lives here in the castle. She might be a ghost, but I’m not sure. She loves this library. If you see her, you better leave immediately,” she said, and I couldn’t help but think about the girl in my dreams.

“She is a bad girl,” Villeneuve insisted. “Don’t be fooled by her beauty, and never do what she says.”

When I wanted Villeneuve to elaborate, she refused and looked angered again. I didn’t push it. I couldn’t risk her not trusting me. I thought I was too close to asking her to let me go to ruin it now. Although she had warned me of that girl, I believed the girl in my dream had helped me a lot. I did change, didn’t I? I did see through Villeneuve’s skin of bestiality, and let her show me the beauty in the beast whose skin she lived in. My imprisonment in the castle wasn’t horrifying anymore. I wasn’t scared of the beast. We made peace. If I still wanted to leave, then it was only for one reason: I felt out of place. I wanted to see the world outside, see my mother and tell her that I was still alive, and sail back out to sea. I wanted to have chances, to try and to fail, and choose what I wanted to be or do on my own terms in the end.

As much as I understood the beast, I was still determined to leave, and that was when I asked her to let me go…

The rage that possessed her was darker and fiercer than anything I had seen before. She lost the shining in her eyes to a miserable dark, like a spoiled child with evil powers, about to torment me to death. Every plant around us died as the library shook like in earthquakes, books flying in the air everywhere.

I ran away, lost in the maze of the library, and hid in the darkest corner I found as she called angrily for me. It didn’t look like she was going to hurt me and chain me to the bed. Her anger was blinding, so I thought she was going to kill me.

A couple of books fell next to me, and I couldn't help but notice they were all books about beauties and beasts from every corner of history, fairy tales, and fables. I couldn't read all the titles, as the light was feeble in my hideout, but I read the title of The Phantom of the Opera, where a girl loved a ghost; Cupid and Psyche; The Hunchback of Notre-Dame; and East of the Sun and West of the Moon, where the beast was a prince disguised as a bear. I remembered this story now. I had read it when I was a kid, but just forgot about it. That's why the castle's evil address was East of the Sun, West of the Moon. All these stories were about the love between a beauty and a beast. Were all other books the same? Did she spend her time reading just about forbidden romances between beauties and beasts? Was that why she had the idea of trapping me inside, and never thought of trapping any of the locals who had threatened to burn her? She trapped me because I was beautiful, and expected me to fall in love with her?

I lost my temper and started pulling books from the shelves, and reading their titles as my thoughts wandered; most of the beasts were men in these stories I had mentioned. My situation was quite different. I wondered if this meant anything.

Then I came about a book called The Beauty and the Beast. Upon opening it, I found out that its pages were empty, and they dissolved and poured like sand through my hands. I opened every book with the same title, The Beauty and the Beast, and the same thing happened. The books were empty.

What did that mean?

But I had no time to understand. Villeneuve, the beast, was about to find me in the maze of the library. I ran and ran in the dark and endless corridors of the library, until I glimpsed a golden, thin ray of light peeking from under a small door. I open it, entered, and locked it behind me.

Looking around, I discovered I was back in the room with the mirror again, having only entered from a different door. I ran to the mirror, hoping it would reply and advise me what to do. The beast was pounding on the door outside.

"Mirror!" I said. "What should I do? She is going to kill me."

“Don’t listen to her,” Villeneuve screamed behind the door, crying and sounding regretful. I didn’t know if she was trying to trick me, but she had never tricked me before. She’d been mad and angry, but had never been manipulative. “Don’t listen to the mirror, or the girl. Please!” Villeneuve begged.

“I can help you,” the girl in the mirror said. “You can kill her easily. All you have to do is to make her see her reflection in the mirror. Why do you think there are no mirrors in the castle?”

I didn’t have time to read between the lines or ask why a mirror would kill her. Villeneuve was already breaking through the walls, and I had no choice but to try my luck with the mirror. I pulled the tall mirror and turned it to face Villeneuve, so it was the first thing she bumped into once she entered.

It worked.

Villeneuve screamed when she saw her reflection in the mirror.

“Why?” she said. “The girl and the mirror fooled you. I didn’t want this to happen.”

Villeneuve didn’t die, or get hurt, looking in the mirror. She just got down on her knees and kept crying. I had to turn and see what her reflection in the mirror looked like. What I saw was beyond belief.

Villeneuve had turned into the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. She turned into the lovely, fabulous-looking girl in the pink dress I saw in my dreams.

Puzzled, I turned around, looking at the real Villeneuve. She had transformed from a beast to the girl in my dreams.

“Are you happy now?” Villeneuve said to me.

“What do you mean?” I asked. What was going on? “Why didn’t you tell me you were the girl in my dreams? Why did you warn me of her, if she was you?”

“It wasn’t me. She only looked like me, planted in your dream by this evil mirror.”

“What?” When I looked back at the mirror, it had turned black again.

“It’s a curse by this castle I live in,” Villeneuve explained. “It’s an enchanted evil castle, controlled by the Queen of Sorrow. She sent me here after she wasn’t able to take what she wanted from me in her castle. She sent me here to punish me in this cursed castle.” It seemed like there was no time for me to learn what had happened in the Queen’s bathtub chamber. “The castle has a soul of its own, and many of the famous stories you read in books happened here.” Villeneuve was crying hysterically. “Every beauty and the beast story happened in this castle.”

“You mean all the books in the library are only describing things that happened here? Cupid and Psyche, The Phantom of the Opera, and The Hunchback of Notre-Dame? This is absurd.”

“The castle takes all shapes and forms. It lives in different countries in different times. Sometimes, it lives in people’s dreams. It has to be fed to stay alive. It’s cursed. Can’t you understand? The castle is the true beast!”

“And what does this have to do with you? With me?”

“In order for the castle to survive, it needs to capture a soul, a beauty, and turn it into a beast. It’s what it feeds on. It seduces a traveler and turns it into a beast, and it’s fueled with its victim’s pain. It’s done this before for thousands of years with those you read about in the books. The Queen knew this and punished me in here, knowing that the castle will never give up on me, unless…” Villeneuve gazed at me with more tears in her eyes.

“Unless what?”

“Unless I am loved by someone,” she said, sobbing. “That’s what I was hoping you would do. Love me for who I am, and then we both would be free. ‘Things must be loved before they are lovely.’ It’s the phrase that breaks the curse.”

“But I—” I was tongue-tied.

“But you didn’t love me, I know,” Villeneuve said. “Even when I tried my best to let you love me. It could have happened, if only you hadn’t asked to leave me. I couldn’t control my anger in the beast form.”

“So why did the castle trick me into taming you, and then into asking you to let me go?” I asked, still holding the mirror in my hands.

“Because the mirror is part of the castle. It’s evil, possessed by a girl called Mary,” Villeneuve explained. “She tricked you because she knew if you gave me hope and then asked me, my anger would be fierce and then the beast inside me would hurt you more, and you’d never ever love me. This way, I’d never leave the castle.”

“And why did you regain your real looks now?”

“I don’t think the castle planned this, but it’s because you made me look in the mirror. Part of the curse was that the person who insisted I looked in the mirror…” Villeneuve shrugged. She was talking about me now.

“What? What happens to the person who insisted in making you look in the mirror?”

“He’d take my place,” Villeneuve said with moistened eyes. “Especially when they’re beautiful.”

“What?”

“Look in the mirror, go see for yourself,” she said.

I looked, and then I let the mirror fall and splinter into pieces. It was better that way, than to look at my horrible, beastly new look. I was cursed instead of Villeneuve.

“If you only were able to love me,” Villeneuve said, standing up. “None of this would have happened.”

“Where are you going?” I said with tears in my eyes.

“I have to leave as long as the castle’s doors are open for me. They will only let me out. The castle has a new beast. You! I am so sorry.” Villeneuve ran to open the door, but I yelled at her.

“Will you come visit me, then? I know I am cursed and don’t know what to do about it, but will you at least come visit the beast? We danced together, remember? I was so close to loving you,” I screamed.

“But you didn’t,” Villeneuve said. “I was going to wait for you forever until you did, but you didn’t. Besides, I can’t visit you anymore.”

“Why?”

“I know that I won’t remember any of this once I go back home to my family. I will forget all of this after the first night I sleep and have ordinary dreams.”

Villeneuve left me, and I became the new beast for the castle.

It would be silly of me if I told you of my time in the castle after that, learning its timeless secrets, and spending my loneliness among more and more books. All I can tell you is that I have left a lot untold in this story, including names and dates for reasons you should not hear from me.

Within time, I had accepted my fate with all the weirdness of the tale and what happened to me, but one thing always bothered me when I entered the library. It was that the books titled *The Beauty and the Beast* were still only sand. They were the only empty books in the library. I had always thought that they were empty because my story with Villeneuve hadn’t reached a conclusion by then. But if that was the case, why weren’t they written yet?

Like many other things in life, I forgot about the matter as time tick-tocked away.

What mattered the most was that after a while I understood how the lovely girl called Villeneuve not only looked like a beast, but acted like a beast when she was cursed, because the same thing happened to me.

In the beginning, I was only wearing the carcass of a beast as my skin. I thought if I waited long enough, fate should bring a girl my way, and I would invite her in the castle and make her love me like Villeneuve tried with me. This time, I was going to be patient, caring, treat her well, and show her that *‘Things must be loved before they are lovely’*. I would resist my beastly nature. Then we would both be free, and I’d be the first to survive the castle’s curse.

But the beast wasn’t just a carcass. It took over my soul, heartbeat by heartbeat, until I didn’t recognize my old heart anymore.

The beast in me led me to find a book of dark arts and enchantments in the library. There were ways to control another's heart and fate in the book. I used it with a crystal ball to bring a girl to me in my castle. I created a bad-luck charm for her father, who was a merchant, so that he became poor. Then I cursed him with a spell that sent him to the sea like me, and let him survive the shipwreck and arrive on an island that sent him to a road where he could read a sign that said, 'East of the Sun, West of the Moon'. At this point, my castle appeared in front of him. He entered it, ate, and found a red flower outside, but didn't know of its real purpose. He had only picked it up because his daughter had dreamt of it.

I showed myself to him and threatened to kill him, pretending that the flower meant a lot to me and that he had to give me something really precious in return. I pushed him to offer me one of his three daughters who lived in a small house, and experienced the real happily-ever-afters, living in the Kingdom of Sorrow.

The man agreed, and went back to send me his daughter…

As I write this diary right now, the doorbell of the castle is ringing. I am glad I completed my tale before my visitor came, or you might have never known about it. My visitor is a special guest, and my visitor means both life and death to me.

I am going to stand up now and leave this diary be. I will go open the castle's gate for my visitor, the daughter of the man I cursed under the influence of the beast inside me. I will try my best to make her love me. I will try to be patient, chivalrous, and understanding if she doesn't love me right away. I will be understanding if she thinks she is only here to save her father from getting killed, choosing to sacrifice herself while her two sisters gave up on him. And after that, I will let her go home, so it will be her choice to return with her love for me, or escape my cursed bestiality forever.

If she does return, then I'll break free from the curse, and we will live happily ever after. If she doesn't, I will understand that she owes me nothing. I did hurt her before, while all she wanted from me was to love her.

I take one last look at the Persian canvas on the wall and read the words aloud: *'Things must be loved before they are lovely'.*

I will go now and open the door for Villeneuve, who doesn't remember that she was once the beast.

As I leave you, it occurs to me that I know now why the pages of the book titled *The Beauty and the Beast* were empty. It's because they weren't written yet. It's my job to fill its pages while Villeneuve is with me in the castle. It's my duty to make the story right.

I hope that one day when the pages in the book are written, and you read it, you'll find that I succeeded in making her love me. Only then, it won't matter who is beauty and who is beast, because we all had our share of both sides—one way or another.

Until then I spent my lonely days and nights reading books from the mysterious library. Most of them were *diaries* written by what ordinary folks would call 'fairy tale characters'. Each character seemed to have their own *origin story* to tell.

I slowly realized I was one of them, but didn't grasp the significance until later. I also gathered I may be immortal, because most of them were. And that the diaries didn't necessarily tell the complete truth. Some of the characters may have manipulated it to their own favor, which might cause confusion at times – I solved this by adding my notes at the end of most of the diaries; I called them *'MY NOTES'*.

The diaries, probably because all stories are prequels to what the Brother Grimm have made you believe about them.

But we warned. You will never be the same again after you read the stories. I like to think of prequels as poisoned apples, once you taste them, you'll never see fairy tales in the same light again.

End of Diary



Grimm Prequel #19

FRIDAY THE 13TH

as told by Sleeping Beauty

Dear Diary,

My name is Wendy Darling. I'm far from being a *darling*. Some call me Sleeping Beauty. Again, I'm hardly asleep and far from a cutie, goodie beauty.

In fact, I'm as dark as black swans are. I'd kill you before you'd even know it. I'd drink your blood while you're breathing your last; not so much because I'm thirsty, but just for the fun of it.

If you're smart enough, you'd run for your life. You'd even stop reading this diary.

And if you're a priest or a man who does good in this world, don't preach please. Really, don't. It's not like I'm beyond absolution or redemption. The point is I like what I do.

I like the chaos, the pain, and the power of scaring people. It's hard to come across a girl like me — unless it's Bloody Mary. But she's nothing but an angry girl trapped in a mirror at the end of the day

Me? I'm happy to bite your neck and I'm unapologetic about it. I may even ask you to smile on your death bed for me.

What is that I hear you say?

Ah, you think my nastiness is a cover for my pain. You say that because you think you know me. You think you know who I am and what I have been through. Let me tell you this: I'm like a phoenix — not like Cerené, but I've been burned once. Long ago. And I've risen without complaints. I did it so many times, I think of it as a hobby.

My memories are the phoenix's ashes. My power is the fire I am breathing onto the world.

I don’t relate. I don’t sympathize. And I don’t feel guilt. The one thing I am loyal to — and I repeat, it’s the only thing — is my fellow black swans. They’re my tribe. We’ll forever wage a war against whatever is white in this world.

Be it roses. Be it pure hearts. If you relate to anything white, be afraid. I’m going to sound clichéd here and repeat myself:

Be very afraid.

And if you that think I’d only stain everything white with my darkness, you’re incredibly mistaken. Delusional. Darkness doesn’t leave a mark behind. Things get dark and disappear. Darkness is as clichéd as my earlier sentence.

What I’d do to everything that’s white is spatter it with red. The color of your insides. The color of Death itself. And the color of the one girl I hate the most in the world.

Snow White.

Think of it. Black, white, and red. The colors of my eternal enemy. Lips red as blood, skin pale as snow, and hair as dark as night. Snow White Sorrow. My sister.

I’m not going to retell the story of my mother killing me in favor of her precious princess. If you don’t know that yet, then you haven’t read all the diaries.

And I really don’t have time to tell you about what you’ve missed.

What this diary is about is much more interesting. It’s not just the diary of a pissed-off sixteen-year-old girl — a Sleeping Beauty vampire, some would argue. It’s a diary with a secret. One that the world has been wondering about for hundreds of years.

It’s about Friday the Thirteenth.

You’d think it’s a day like any other day. An urban legend, populated by teenage boys and girls and pop culture movies and books — I’m writing this while I’m in the Real World in 2015; I’ve been having some evil fun here for some time.

Friday the thirteenth, if you really knew what it was all about.

People never ask themselves these questions. The origins of our belief. People are lazy. They never do. They only love to spook themselves by giving in to the fact that we should be scared on that day. Never really asking why.

Older people still cling to their traditional beliefs. Keep silent. Never talk about what scares you the most. Keep the monster in the closet. The beast under your bed. Just don't say a word.

Younger people celebrate fear so loud you'd think they're brave and ready for the life ahead of them. Trust me, when you're young, celebrating fear is only an art for covering your demons.

Youth is festive. It's loud. Always linked to love and expectations. When in truth, youth is the time you're afraid of every other thing in the world. Especially a beast called tomorrow.

But let's get back to Friday the thirteenth. My favorite day in the year.

Did you ever know Friday the thirteenth only happens if the first day in the month is a Sunday? I could be wrong. Peter Pan used to tell me these things.

Wicked, right? The months that start with going to church are the same months we witness the darkness of the scariest day in the year.

The day numbered thirteen.

I remember I had been first introduced to the number thirteen through my fellow black swans. Back then when I spend my early childhood in Swan Lake in Sorrow, a man used to come to tell us stories. Fairy tales, he called him. A tall man who never showed himself to us, hiding behind the veils of night.

We were told to call him the Father of Swans — later I learned he was the Piper of Hamelin, raising us vampire swans for a great war in Sorrow many years later.

Point is, the Piper told us real fairy tales. The dark ones. Plain and dull, without make up and wishful thinking. We swans loved those tales.

I loved them a lot. You have no idea. Because I'd known and lived one of the tales myself. The day my mother had left me for the darkness to consume my soul. But like I said, I'm not delving into that now.

The Piper told us about more and more fairy tales. He even told us of their real origins and secret. He told us about the Brothers Grimm and how they forged the tales for reasons he didn't want to explain then.

But he also told us about a strange fact. That none of the tales ever started with the number thirteen. There were the Twelve Princesses, the Six Swans, the Four Feathers, and so many other numbers in fairy tale titles — including a never told tale called *The Lost Seven*.

But never the Thirteen Geese or The Thirteen whatever.

"Why is that the case?" I had asked, eager to learn.

"I'm amazed you should ask," the Piper told me, leaving me perplexed and confused. "I'm amazed you ask this question, Wendy."

I trembled. It should have felt like a compliment that the Father of Swans — and all evil — knew my name. But it scared the black feathers out of me, too. "Me? Why?"

"One day you'll know why," he said. "One day, probably in the future, you'll understand why people are really afraid of Friday the thirteenth."

"Friday? Not just the number?"

"Let's start with the number now," he said. "People fear this number. It's an exquisite number, mathematically, that is. But I am not interested in that. I'd like to tell you about the people who fear this number, so much they can't stand the thirteenth day in month."

All of us swans wondered why.

"People in Sorrow, and even outside of the Realms of the Seven Seas, fear if it's the thirteenth day in the month. They worry if they're the thirteenth in any gathering. And so on. Even the Father of Time stopped the month's count, and galaxies in the skies, at the number twelve. He feared if there were a thirteenth month it would be the deadliest of all."

“Maybe that’s a power we need to study and use,” my bloody mind of a child swan suggested.

The Piper made a sound. I believe he was impressed with me. “We will, Wendy. One day, we will.”

“What about Friday?” I asked.

“If Friday and the thirteenth coincide, the powers of evil arise like never before.”

Us swans fluttered our tiny wings. We loved evil. We weren’t like other villains who behaved in evil ways but pretended they were good. We didn’t have excuses for our inner ugliness. Our darkness was beautiful. We cherished and prided ourselves of it.

“As you grow up and become women, you will understand the significance of this number,” the Piper said. “Especially you, Wendy.”

“Why me?” I couldn’t help myself. I had to know.

“Leave it until the time is right. Time is the best storyteller of all. Just remember that there’s never been a fairy tale with the number thirteen.”

That’s when I asked him the awaited question. “Will there ever be?”

The Piper stood up, his silhouette merging with the night. “That’s up to you, Wendy. Only you can write such a tale.”

And then he disappeared in the dark.

I spent most of my youth looking for answers about the number thirteen. But hardly found any. Most people in Sorrow were fixated on other numbers. Like the number seven.

The Lost Seven, you know.

It was until the day came that I needed to leave Swan Lake and wanted to explore the world outside that everything changed.

“You’re not allowed to leave,” Mother Swan, our caretaker, told me. “Black swans are an army. We raise vicious and powerful swans, and will

only allow you to leave when you're powerful enough to help the Piper in his quest."

"I'm sure he'd want me to leave," I said. "I can feel it."

"Who do you think you are, Wendy?" she said. "You're just an orphan child with little power and so much you haven't learned yet."

I didn't know my father and mother were Carmilla Karnstein and Angel Von Sorrow then. But I had never believed I was just a random orphan. They'd tried to send me to live with foster black swans many times. But I couldn't stand any of them, and ended back in Swan Lake again.

So I gave up, just for while, until my thirteenth birthday.

All year long I thought about the number thirteen. If it's all that evil, why couldn't I feel its power? Why couldn't I use it to leave Swan Lake and explore the world?

Then it came to me. One day I realized what I needed to do to leave Swan Lake. I realized how Mother Swan would be forced to exile me. My only way out was in pain and shame.

It was a devious plan, especially for a thirteen-year-old.

You wonder what I did?

Not much really, compared to the horrors I committed later in life. But it was my first horror. The most beautiful one.

And it started by accident.

One of the black swans, a girl about my age, wouldn't let me swim in her territory. She'd always been like that. She'd always been the strongest and most feared of my age.

But I was losing it, wanting to leave. So all I did was I slashed my wings at her when she stopped me. Blood sprouted out of her face in ways I'd never seen before. And I didn't even want to hurt her.

I was too late.

Other swans gathered around me, wanting to punish me. The laws of black swans dictated I should be killed immediately.

I was going to die.

But I wouldn't let it happen. The Piper's words about me being special may have been a reason. But the real reason was the memory of my twin sister, Snow White Von Sorrow. I wasn't going to die before I had found her, tortured her, and killed her first.

Not before I made my mother see her white, precious, and pale daughter drown in her own blood, in her own bloodbath in paradise, the color she loved the most.

So I slashed left and right at the other swans.

This was when I learned the secret behind winning wars. Even though I was one against many, I dominated them and killed each and every one of my swan sisters.

Why?

Because I had more to prove than any of them. A simple fact of life. She who needed to prove herself the most rose and fluttered high in the seven skies. Because when everyone was asleep, she was staying up to learn, sharpening her nails. When everyone was dreaming of cute boys in their sleep, she was soaked in the nightmares of her fears. When everyone thought they were backed up by the courtship of friends, she was embracing the power of her loneliness.

That was me.

When the other black swans fought me, they were secretly sure they'd kill me. How could they not when all their powers were gathered against one?

As for me, I had no one to back me up but me. Every slash had to be accurate and as powerful as I could make it. Even better than I could. And with every drop of blood of the swans I was raised among, I clung tighter to my loneliness. I realized the power of self. The power of me.

I didn’t hesitate killing my own tribe, the only thing I told you I loved the most earlier.

In the end, I stood tall, my neck up in Swan Lake, singing everybody else’s swan song. Everybody had to die in order for Wendy to live, just like I had to be left behind for Snow White to become princess.

Mother Swan couldn’t believe the massacre at Swan Lake. She easily let me go. If she’d only listened to me earlier.

On my way out of Swan Lake, as if out of a dark paradise, the rest of the black swans whistled a goodbye song for me. A tune I thought was Mozart’s Magic Flute for many years.

But it wasn’t.

It was a tune the Piper had taught the swans to sing the day I left Swan Lake. The Pied Piper of Hamlin knew about me more than I’d ever imagined. He’d taught the swans to sing a farewell song he’d composed himself. Part of a prophecy I only learned about years later.

This tune stayed with me so long that in 1893 I felt the need to popularize it. I wanted the world to hear the last song ever whistled in Swan Lake. I terrorized a reverent composer in Russia, feeding his cold and snowy night with the fire of my nightmares until he couldn’t get it out of his mind and had to turn the melodies into a most mesmerizing symphony.

That Russian composer was Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. And that music is now known to the real world as Swan Lake — never mind how they changed it into a romanticized fluffy story.

But the song wasn’t what really mattered. Something much more beautiful and revealing happened that day. Something I could have never imagined. A realization. An epiphany I learned about while mending my wounds of the fights at the Swamp of Sorrow near the Goblin market.

Are you asking what the epiphany was?

I realized that not only was my age thirteen the day I left, but that it also was a Friday.

Which Friday you ask?

Yes, you got it. It was Friday the thirteenth.

It's important to note that this day, even though it'd been an epic page in the book of morbidity, wasn't the reason why people nowadays fear Friday the thirteenth.

I will come to that later.

But it was the first time I realized the power of that specific day. A first step in a long road of recurring darkness happening on the same date years later.

It would take an infinite amount of pages of sand to tell the rest of my story, so let's skip to many years later in the future. Specifically, the time when I had met Peter Pan and fallen for him — that one is a story like not other, but I don't feel it's the time to talk about it. Now.

Let me forward you to a moment in my history you may have heard about. A rainy day in Dracula's castle in Transylvania. The castle Peter Pan lived in for a while.

On that day I'd been dead for years in a loop of time traveling you're better off not knowing about. And Peter was determined to wake me up, resurrect me back into life. Except that it wasn't easy. He needed to dig up Count Dracula up from his grave with Hunchy's help — you know the Hunchback of Notre Dame? Yes, him.

Peter woke up the famous vampire, whom most people mistake for being the first vampire - a callous lie — and brought him to the castle where he planned to wake me up from an eternal sleep I had been cursed into.

Yes, me, Sleeping Beauty, at this point.

The ritual was that I needed to drink Count Dracula's blood to wake up. None other than his would have resurrected me. I'll spare you the rest of the ritual's bloody details.

All you need to know is that Peter needed to wake me up. And it worked. I drank Dracula's blood and opened the door to my loving Peter waiting for me.

He let me drink his blood, too, to strengthen my long buried Swan Soul. Peter had always had a weakness for me. And so I returned to the Real World, having been buried in the Dream World for years — a long story I'll get into in another diary.

The point of reminding you of this story?

A few days after my resurrection, I realized the day of the ritual was a Friday. The thirteenth of that month.

"Why Friday the thirteenth, Peter?" I asked.

"It's how the ritual works. It had to be that day. No other day would have brought you back, darling."

I loved it when the boy who never grew up called me *darling*. Much better than Sleeping Beauty or Sleeping Swan.

But I was still confused. What did I have to do with Friday the thirteenth? And why did people fear that day?

Only the Piper knew, but he was nowhere to be found, even though he told me that one day I would know the reason why.

So I dug and searched, looking for answers. Peter had an incredibly large library in his castle. A library that was said to have existed in the same castle where Beauty and the Beast first met.

A boring library, if you ask me.

Its shelves appeared and disappeared, based on whether they wanted to show themselves to you. Its corridors had been too long, getting darker the farther you walked. So much dark that I heard some people were consumed by it and never came back.

The books in library had also been strange. Aside of being books of sands, only read once every hundred years, most books were nothing but empty pages because they'd not been written yet.

Neither I nor Peter had been fond of such mysteries. So we spent the rest of day spreading the chaos I liked so much. We kidnapped people,

sometimes I drank their blood, or whatever made me love my life even more.

Until one day when I came across a book that told of the day the Piper had visited the town of Hamlin, the twenty-sixth of June 1284. The story of how the Founders refused to pay him and how he kidnapped their children and sent them to Transylvania and turned them into the first vampires in the world.

And of course, the story of how seven of the children escaped him. How he spent the rest of his life chasing them and their descendants all over the world. The children whom everyone called the Lost Seven.

None of that really mattered at the moment.

All but one thing. It turned out the day the Piper sent the children to Transylvania, a few weeks after the incident at Hamlin, had been… you guessed it. A Friday. The thirteenth. The first day the first vampire was born, made out of magical spell that involved a mixture of blood, milk, and chocolate.

“You think this is a coincidence?” I asked Peter, who was playing with his knife, hardly paying attention.

“Friday the thirteenth? I don’t think so. I heard many important events in our history occurred that day.”

“I can accept that,” I said. “A date that is significant and important. But why do people fear it?”

“It’s a dark day that brings dark memories,” was Peter’s simple answer. “The day you killed the rest of the swans. The day the Piper began his legacy of vampires. Awfully creepy things, I must say.”

But I wasn’t convinced. “Doesn’t explain why people fear it so much.”

“I once heard that deep down in people’s collective memory, they know why they fear it. They just can’t remember it.”

“What is collective memory?”

“Some call it Ancestor’s Memory. The memories your ancestors pass on to you without you ever knowing it. You’d wake up realizing you’re scared of something but never knowing why. Like how each of us discovers they have an inner instinct for hunting if they ever tried it. An instinct passed on to us by our first grandfathers who had to hunt to eat.”

“Are you saying fear is the same?”

“Of course. We may fear things and don’t know why because they have been passed to us by our ancestors.”

And that was where the conversation stopped. Nothing was solved. I still didn’t know why people feared Friday the thirteenth.

Days went by, and later I learned the day the Kingdom of Sorrow was threaded into life by a woman called Lady Shallot was also a Friday, the thirteenth.

This and many other memories in Sorrow.

What was the secret?

On my own, I traveled to the city one day, with Hunchy guiding me around. It was a Friday. The thirteenth. All teenagers were about to celebrate it, watching silly movies and talking about it.

Unlike the rest, I was there to get answers.

But learning about how people responded to that day, I began to realize how much fun it was. In fact, this was my kind of fun. Wendy style. It was time to head into the woods with a few teenagers and spend the night in a dark cabin and lose my virginity, then die horribly by the blade or the chainsaw.

Except that I was going to be the one with the chainsaw.

“Wendy,” Hunchy said. “Do we really have to do this?”

“It’s fun, Hunchy. We’re going to have so much fun.”

“And what will my role be in all of this?”

I neared him and whispered. “You’re going to be the bogeyman with the chainsaw outside,” I said. “At least, until only one or two are left. That’s when I come in and scare the *fridays* out of their souls.”

“What will you be doing while I’m outside?”

“I’ll be pretending I’m one of them, having spooky fun with them.”

And so I made friends with a few teenagers, we went to the woods. It wasn’t that hard. I am very friendly and attractive when I want to be. I’m Sleeping Beauty.

And there, in the cabin in the woods, some teenagers began talking about the things they knew about Friday the thirteenth.

They told me the fear of Friday the thirteenth went back to 1700 B.C., when the ancient Babylon’s code of Hammurabi omitted the number thirteen in its list of laws because they feared it. I didn’t know who those Hammurabi were, nor did I care. I wasn’t looking for more people scared of the number and the day.

They told me that the number thirteen was so unlucky, in fact, that in 1881 an organization called the Thirteen Club attempted to improve the number’s reputation.

Then they told me about an eccentric Boston stockbroker called Thomas Lawson who published a book called Friday the Thirteenth in 1907. The book told of an evil businessman’s attempt to crash the stock market on the unluckiest day of the month.

But none of that made sense to me. In fact, I knew much more than them. It seemed like they were really useless — like I’d expected them to be. It was time to have fun with them.

The first thing I did was to suggest one of the muscular boys go out and find us wood for the fire in the cabin — it doesn’t get more cliché, does it?

He didn’t want to, but did after I flirted with him a little.

I went back and chatted with the youths, waiting for a scream or a panicked rap on the door.

But it didn’t come.

Where was Hunchy? Why wasn’t he terrorizing the boy outside?

It was then when one of the teenagers told me about a strange story.

“Did you ever hear about the war of colors?” she said, all her friends gathered in the room.

“The war of colors?” I asked.

“Black, White, and Red,” she said.

Now she had my interest. The three colors of Sorrow. The three colors of my sister. One of the colors that I hated the most. “What about them?”

“My grandmother used to tell me this story about an eternal war in what she called the fairy tale world,” the girl began.

“And you believed her,” I laughed. “There is no such thing as a fairy tale world.”

“It’s Friday the thirteenth, Wendy,” another girl said. “Just humor her.”

And now I was the outdated girl all of a sudden.

“So the story goes like this,” the girl said. “In the fairy tale world, the three colors represent three forces. One evil. One Good. And the last one, a catalyst.”

“The catalyst?” I said.

“A force that is natural. Neither bad nor good.”

“I see,” I said, not expecting what was coming next.

“So the white force and the black were swans,” the girl began. “Like in Swan Lake, you know?”

Everyone was interested now.

“And they were sisters,” the girl said. “Twins.”

I was really bothered by Hunchy’s delay right now. Why hadn’t he scared the boy in the woods yet? And this girl. Who is she? How does she know

this story?

Something was wrong.

“The twin sisters, one evil, one good, were to shape the destiny of the world,” the girl began. “White Swan, Black Swan. One of them was going to win.”

I couldn’t stop listening. “Who was the third force?” I had to ask.

“A red force,” the girl’s eyes bulged. Wood crackled in the fire place, painting wavy shadows on the walls. Things were turning into a typical Friday the thirteenth night already.

“What red force?” I asked.

“Here is the thing,” the girl said. “Imagine the white and black forces on the sides of a scale, equally measured with a fifty-fifty chance.”

“Okay?”

“The red force was the one who was going to make the difference in the world; either aid the black force or the white. That’s why it is the catalyst.”

When she said red, all I could think about was the images of blood on white swans. Remember when I said I’d rather spatter white swans with red instead of veiling them in black? But I couldn’t understand what the girl was saying.

Then the knock on the door came.

Finally!

The boy was shouting outside. Scared as hell.

I began to smile.

The girls opened the door, and my version of a bloody nightmare on Friday the thirteenth began.

“What’s going on?” one of the girls asked the boy.

“The woods!” he panted and locked the door behind him. “It’s real. Something is in the woods.”

“Really?” a skeptical girl in glasses retorted. She was probably the virgin one who lives in the end. “Like we’re going to believe you.”

“You’re just trying to scare us because it’s Friday the thirteenth,” another girl said.

“No,” the boy said. “You don’t understand. It’s real. There is something scary in the woods.”

This is when a window crashed on its own in the living room. Well, I didn’t plan this, but Hunchy was improvising.

Everyone began to panic. I loved it. Soon, I’d be sucking on their blood, although I wasn’t thirsty.

Then the door to the cabin sprang open to a swirling wind. The door broke, and the panic levels escalated to madness. I took advantage of the moment and advised them to run outside, get in the car, and escape.

Of course, the tires were flat, and now we ran, scattered, in the woods.

I ran along, playing my part. Everyone was screaming. But only for a while.

And then…

The screams stopped.

“Hunchy!” I called. “Where are you? What’s going on?”

Slowly, I began to realize that somehow the joke had turned on me. Everyone was gone, and I was left alone in the woods. Not that it scared me. But I had to know what was going on.

This was an interesting Friday, indeed.

Something swooshed before me in the dark. So fast I couldn’t see it.

“Hunchy?” I grimaced.

No reply.

Now this was interesting. Did the boys and girls want to play a prank on me? I’d love to see the fear in their eyes when I killed them if that was the

case.

But time passed and no one came out. I was really alone in the woods now. Me and that swooshing figure in the dark.

“Aren’t you going to show yourself?” I said. “Unless you’re scared of me.”

“I’m not scared of you,” a voice said. It wasn’t Hunchy. Nor was it any of the boys and girl I’d befriended. It was a different girl.

“Who are you?” I stopped in place. I was so curious — and entertained, I have to say. If you’re brave enough to scare me, I am really entertained by your naivety.

“I know why people are scared of Friday the thirteenth,” the girl said.

“You’re not going to tell me about all of those stupid theories again, are you?”

“Facts, not theories, Wendy.”

“Oh, so you know me.” I squinted in the dark, wondering why I couldn’t find the girl with all my vampire powers. This wasn’t an ordinary girl.

“I know you very well.”

“So tell me, if you do know, why are people scared of Friday the thirteenth? Is it an instinctual feeling buried in their ancestor’s memories like I heard?”

“It is,” the girl said. “Something horrible happened on that day, a long time ago.”

“Something like what?”

“Something that the Piper hinted to you about.”

“Ah, so you know the Piper too? Who are you?” I started not to like this.

“People are scared of the day because…”

“Because of what?”

“It’s the day evil was born.”

“Evil? Like devils and such?”

“Worse, Wendy. Worse.”

“Now you have to speak up,” I demanded, losing my temper.

“It’s the day a woman named Carmilla Karnstein gave birth to a twin.”

I shrieked.

Somehow, deep inside, I realized I knew that. This was what it was all about. If you ask anyone why they really fear this day they will never be able to tell you why. And now I know. The Piper tried to tell me. It’s me. The world had not only crushed me from the day I was born, but it decided to honor me with the being the one of the sources of darkness itself.

But why not? I’m fine with it. I’m fine with power. And now that I knew, I had one last request. “Why are you telling me then?” I asked.

“I’m not sure,” the girl said.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I am unlike you, Wendy. You are black in the heart and you love it,” the girl said. “I have another color in my heart, and I’m not sure how to use it. I’m not sure which side of the scale I should lean on.”

I couldn’t believe it. “So it’s you. The red force, like the girl in the cabin said.”

“It’s me.”

“You’ve scared the boys and girls in the woods.”

“A little, yes,” she said. “I even killed one of them.”

I clapped my hands then rubbed them with enthusiasm. “That’s so enchanting, you have no idea.”

“Why are you saying this?”

“Because I could use a friend. A girl. I don’t have any. And maybe you should finally come to your senses and lean to my side. The Black Swan’s side.”

“I’m not sure I’m *that* evil, Wendy. Not really sure if I am evil at all.”

“Come on, you just killed one of the boys and girls in the woods. You said that.”

“I killed the girl in the woods because she had to die. It wasn’t an act of evil.”

I laughed on the inside. The logic of evil was like that. You’d first reason that the evil you did was necessary, then you’d simply become an addict to its power until you give in totally. I was beginning to like this girl. “Don’t worry, red force. Soon you’ll get used to it. It’s alright.”

“You don’t understand, Wendy,” the girl said. “The one I killed had to die. It was a must. A destiny.” She stayed silent for a moment and then said, “Sometimes I have to kill people. Even you; I will have to kill you someday.”

“That’s ambitious.” I laugh aloud. “But you can’t kill me. I’m like nothing you’ve ever seen.”

“You’re wrong.”

That’s when I saw the girl’s silhouette in the dark.

“You know that night you and your sister were born?” she asked.

“Friday the thirteenth,” I said proudly. “Of course, what about it?”

“I was born that night, too,” she said.

And that’s when I started to get it. I understood what the red force is. Why Friday the thirteenth scared people. And who the girl really was.

Slowly, a scythe gleamed into the light of the moon above. Then a red cape appeared through the dark.

“Ladle?”

“It’s me,” she smiled wickedly, squirrels jumping on her shoulders. “Death. The red force. The one who’s destined to either stand by your side or Snow White’s.”

“You were born the same night?”

She nodded. “The universe brought the three of us into this world on that night. The universe had a plan. Black for evil. White for good. Red for… I’m not sure why yet.”

“That’s why the girl you just killed had to die,” I said. “It was her time. The Tree of Life told you. Her name appeared in the cookie.”

Ladle nodded, waving her scythe. “You know whose name came in the cookie, too?”

My black swan face went red.

“Yours, Wendy.” Ladle smiled.

“It can’t be. I’m sure my time hasn’t come yet.”

“No, it didn’t,” she said. “The fortune cookie told me about your date of death, Wendy.”

“Why would the Tree of Life do that?”

“Because you’re special, Wendy. So am I. I was given the chance either to join you, or kill you when the time comes.”

“I can live with that,” I said, chin up. “I will wreak chaos onto the world, and take revenge before my time comes. Be sure of that.”

“I’m sure you will do that,” Ladle said. “I am just not sure who I will support. You or your sister.”

I tried to speak but she shushed me with her scythe. It was times like these when I’m not sure who is stronger than who.

“I will go now,” she said. “But I want to tell you one last thing.”

“Which is?”

“Of all people in the world you should fear Friday the thirteenth the most.”

“Why? I’m the reason why people fear it. You don’t make any sense.”

Ladle smiled one last time at me and walked away, waving her scythe as if she were dancing with it, leaving me undone. I wondered why she didn’t answer my last question. Then, I think I understood.

I understood why I was the prank itself. Because of me the world was doomed to fear a certain day, but it was actually the same date of my death in my future.

Even I wasn’t immune to Friday the thirteenth. A day that would scare the hell out of me more than anyone else in the world for the rest of my life.

End of Diary

MY NOTES

Written by the Beast

Having just read the Sleeping Swan, I sympathized with Wendy – though she does scare me sometimes. I wanted to know more about her, and frankly, this prequel wasn't nearly satisfying enough.

I did enjoy the history behind the Friday the thirteenth and its connection to the prequels, but I want to know more. I guess I'll have to wait for the right prequel to fall into my hands.

I'm still a prisoner of this castle, foolishly waiting for the one I love to come visit me. I am a hapless romantic. She isn't coming back, I suppose. She, who had once been the Beast, now turned to Beauty, would not want to have anything to do with me.

I'm paying for my ignorance. *Things must be loved before they are lovely*, I remind myself.

Maybe I should think of a plan to get her back. But how, when I am confined to this castle?

In truth, I think I'm a prisoner of the library more than anything else. I rarely leave it, unless for food and a bath. I even sleep here, right beside the endless amount of Book of Sands, afraid if I leave they'd disappear and I will never be able to read them again.

A prequel can be read only once every one hundred years, I remind myself again.

It makes me wonder why the universe has chosen me to read the prequels. I mean it's a great burden to have this knowledge about these characters, to holding onto it for a hundred years – if I ever live that long.

But again, I think I'm immortal. I think I'm one of the Lost Seven – which is really driving me insane.

Previous prequels have mentioned the Beast. They talked about me. It must be me, right? There is this particular prequel, Jawigi, when the Queen

of Sorrow asked Cassandra about who the Lost Seven are. I remember clearly, she said the Beast is one of them.

If I am one of the Lost Seven, then I must have met with the rest of them before? Do they know about me, trapped in this castle?

If so – I know I keep asking myself this – how come I don't remember?

Since I'm left with no answers, I better read the next prequel. This one is about the Fisherman's Son. I wonder who that is.



Grimm Prequel #20

The Fisherman's Son

as told by the Fisherman's Son

Dear Diary,

My name is…

Oh…

Wait…

I better not let you know. There is a reason why. The only way to know is if you read on.

There is a reason why. You'll soon understand.

I want to tell you a story about a boy. An important boy. Why this boy? Because he is larger than life. He knows a lot. Things that most people in the Kingdom of Sorrow don't know. Things that happened even before the kingdom came into existence. Things made of mysteries. About the origins of how everyone came to be.

You need to listen carefully though, or you'll miss the beauty of the ending of my diary. Even the middle of my diary is an art of storytelling. I hate it when people don't pay attention. It's the number one reason why they don't fully comprehend the meaning of some of the greatest stories in life.

And because I want you to inhale each and every word, because I want you to pay attention, let's start with your favorite cliché...

Once upon a time there was a boy who loved his mother so much he was willing to die for her. The boy was thirteen-years-old. He and his mother lived on a far away island, farther than most sailors could reach on the Seven Seas.

It was a small island, filled with palm trees, so tall he thought they were the Earth's hands reaching out for the sky. But that had been earlier, when

he was about ten. Growing up he learned that the island rested on the back of a whale. A small one that had been silent for years. Everyone on the island prayed the whale stayed forever asleep, or it would be the end of them.

Years later, the boy was told that the whale had no intentions of turning sides or letting out gas, not before the boy grew up to become a man and sailed away on the quest he was destined to embark upon.

The boy always wondered about this quest. Was he really destined for greatness? Would he ever sail away from here? What about his mother? He couldn't just leave her behind.

Days passed, and the boy grew curiouser about the sea and the mysterious quest.

Some of the few sailors who made it to the island told the boy stories about the world beyond the seas. He liked to hear them, more than anything in the world. Stories brightened his mind and opened up doors to his insatiable imagination.

Stories were life.

The sailors told him about other islands on the Seven Seas. Islands he'd never heard of before. From Murano Island in Italy where magical mirrors were made, to the famous Treasure Island where the most precious pearls in the world were kept. They said that each island on the Seven Seas had a purpose. One which very few people knew of. And once each island fulfilled that purpose, it was destined to sink deep into the abyss of the sea.

How? The whales. Their purpose was to eventually flip over the islands, so no one would ever find them. One of those islands had once been called Atlantis. A famous one that the Greek philosopher Plato wrote about. What Plato didn't know was that Atlantis was where mermaids first came from.

"Mermaids?" the boy wondered. "What's a mermaid?"

"Stop talking to strangers," his mother interrupted. "And go finish your work."

Sometimes his mother didn’t want him to talk to the sailors. Strangers, she called them. Sometimes she deliberately didn’t want him to know about the world outside, and he hardly questioned why.

But the boy listened to his mother and went back to work in the only inn on the island, which he and his mother inherited from his deceased father.

The boy’s mother took care of him, and the inn. She was an honorable and hardworking woman. She loved her son and her job. She fed the birds on the tower next to the inn whenever she had time.

She worked in the inn by day, and prayed for her boy to become the best boy in the world by night. In between, she prayed the angels would protect him from the darkness and temptations of the Seven Seas.

The boy’s father had been a fisherman, killed on a fishing trip, while optimistically — some would say foolishly — searching for a precious faerie inside a fish in the Seven Seas. A faerie that knew the whereabouts of a treasure everyone was looking for.

It had been a known story on the Seven Seas that some fish swam around with pearls inside their guts. The remnants of an immense treasure that had belonged to the gods themselves - the treasure which had been known to be buried on Treasure Island.

One day, a vicious faerie killed all the fish, ripped their guts open, and took the precious pearls. And now, chased by forces of darkness, she hid inside one of the gutted fish in the Seven Seas. A fish of enchanting and never seen before colors.

The boy had always believed in the story. Even more so after his father died on that quest. But the boy’s mother always digressed. She said that fairy tales were figments of the imaginations of children’s nightmares. Nothing more.

Which upset the boy, because it meant his fisherman father had died for nothing.

The boy never believed his father had died for nothing. So he had to ask around.

Some sailors rumored the boy’s father was killed by a whale. One that wanted the faerie, and the pearls, more than anything. A whale that swam fearlessly throughout the Seven Seas. A whale called Moby Dick.

Other sailors said he was killed by Captain Hook, a terrible man with a long beard and a hook for a hand, who wandered the sea, delusional about believing he was Fate itself. Hook killed whomever he wanted and pardoned whomever he believed deserved to live.

A third group of sailors said the boy’s father had been killed by the sirens, the vicious mermaids of the seas, the ones his mother didn’t want him to know about. The boy had once heard the sailors talk about the tempting songs the mermaids hymned. The kind of songs no man could resist. Once men weakened to the songs, mesmerized by the sirens’ beauty, the mermaids of the lost Atlantis ate them alive.

Lastly, there was a group of sailors who claimed his father never went looking for the faerie inside the fish. But something else. Something larger than life.

But the boy had no means of knowing for sure. How could he without sailing into the Seven Seas himself?

The boy’s father was called Admiral Benbow. They had the inn named after him. A catchy name of a foolish sailor, once thought of as brave in the eyes of the islanders.

Admiral Benbow. Remember that name.

Like I said, sailors from all around the world were always tempted to stop their ships at the inn. Something about the small island — and inn — drew their sails close. None of the sailors knew why. Some claimed they were escaping the vicious songs of the mermaids in the sea. Others said they heard voices calling them from the island.

They'd arrive and try to tell the boy more stories, but his mother wouldn't let him listen.

So the boy's life went on as boring. The island had a poor education system, few residents, and one abandoned church. The boy would work and help his mother all day, doing his best to impress her and fill his father’s

void. He cleaned the barns, the toilets, and fed the birds. He wasn't fond of doing the dishes, unless he had a view out to the sea while he did. He slept in his father's room, overlooking the wide and endless sea, and wondered about its endlessness.

Did the Seven Seas really run forever, like the skies above? Was the ocean as endless as the rest of the universe?

Each night the boy wondered what it would be like to sail the world. But even if the unlikely chance presented itself, he still couldn't leave his mother. His father had told him to take care of her in a dream that felt more real than the air he breathed right now.

Each night the boy hummed a little prayer — one he had invented, for the lack of a priest in the church who'd died in a thunder and lightning storm. The boy was grateful in his prayers, for the bread he ate, the mother he had, and even his father who'd died. It had been a tradition to be thankful for whatever the ocean sent them on that island. Regret, anger, and dissatisfaction were unforgiven sins.

But at the end of the prayer, the boy asked for a fair opportunity to present itself. One where he could sail away, just for a few days, find his father's fish and the faerie, and return home rich enough that his mother could stop working at the inn.

Then the boy fell asleep.

In his sleep, he dreamt about a place he liked to call the Dreamworld. He never knew why the name stuck with him. It just did. His mother, when he told her, would argue it was all in his head. But he knew better. The Dreamworld was real.

In fact, the Dreamworld was huge, as endless as the ocean. There were a lot of people there. Kings and Queens, Princes and Princesses. Heroes and villains. Love and pain.

But he didn't know anyone there, and no one cared for him. He was just a lanky thirteen-year-old boy with freckles on his cheeks. He had no certain talents and owned nothing of importance, except a hand knife his father had given him to cut the fish and carve his name on trees.

The boy was a stranger in this world of adults, even in his dreams.

However, there was this girl he saw in the Dreamworld. She was pretty, and a bit feisty. He'd usually see her at a Swan Lake, combing her hair, but could hardly remember her face when he woke up to the sound of his mother, urging him to go fishing and help her at the inn for another day.

The boy worked harder and harder, always looking out at the wide and endless sea. Until the day when everything changed. And this my friends, is where the real story began…

One day, a sunburned sailor came to the island. He was singing, "Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum!"

The sailor burst through the front door of the family's establishment. He was a middle-aged man, dirty, unshaven, and tanned. The boy had seen many sunburned sailors before, but this one's tan was unusually dark.

The sailor called himself a 'captain'. He demanded a room. The boy told his mother he would like to personally take care of the guest's needs. His mother was reluctant, but crammed with so much to do, she approved.

As much as the boy was fascinated with the captain, he also thought of him as a strange man.

After only a day's stay at the Admiral Benbow Inn, the man began drinking tons of whiskey each night. The boy worried about the effect on the captain, as the captain had begun hallucinating things that made no sense. Then, he began telling the boy terrifying stories about life on the Seven Seas, about men who lived inside whales, and about the same beautiful mermaids that were incredibly evil.

He told him about a place the boy had seen in the dreams. It was called the Kingdom of Sorrow.

The man told the boy about seven teenagers who would change the world. About a princess who had split her heart among them to defeat her own mother. About wolves, forests, and a girl who was Death itself and wore a red cape.

The stories whetted the boy's appetite to sail the seas. He knew it would be full of wonders, if not a little bit scary as well. Each night, the boy spent more time in the drunk captain's room, listening to the amazing stories of the sea.

The captain seemed to like the boy, enough to ask his name instead of always calling him 'young sailor'.

"Hawkins," the boy said eagerly. "Jim Hawkins!"

"But your father was Admiral Benbow, wasn't he?" the drunk captain said with a slurring tongue.

"Benbow Hawkins," Jim said. "And he was never an admiral," Jim looked embarrassed. "What's your name, sir?"

"You talk too much." The captain lost his temper suddenly, and showed Jim outside.

The boy stood outside, confused. Why had the captain gotten angry all of a sudden?

A few days later, when the autumn tides had relaxed a bit, another ship came. A smaller one. Another old man came into the inn asking about a 'captain'.

"Who should I tell him asked for him?" Jim said. The captain had taken a walk to the beach.

"Black Dog," the man said. He snickered, showing a silver tooth. Jim didn't like Black Dog. He looked evil and stank of seaweed.

"Is that your name, Black Dog?" Jim said. Never had he met someone with such a silly name.

"You talk too much, boy," Black Dog said.

"I guess I do," Jim rolled his eyes. "The captain said the same. Well, he just took a walk to the beach."

"I love the beach," Black Dog growled, showing a row of silver teeth, and walked out.

That night the captain came back late, blood staining his outfit. Jim's mother was asleep, so she didn't see it, but Jim began to worry.

"Have you seen Black Dog?" Jim asked enthusiastically. "He was looking for you."

"I assumed you told him I was by the beach," the captain's face knotted. "Anyways, Black Dog took his boat and sailed away. You won't be seeing him again."

"Such a short stay," Jim said. "My mother would've been happier if he'd stayed the night. One more customer, more money." Jim chuckled innocently.

The captain said nothing, and continued climbing the stairs up to his room.

"So no more stories tonight?" Jim was disappointed.

"Later, Jim," the captain said gruffly, and walked on.

Jim spent the night looking outside his window, looking out at the sea. The moon was full that night. It reflected peacefully upon the water. But then Jim saw something that worried him. Captain Black Dog's small ship was still by the beach. He hadn't left like the captain had told him.



The next day the captain spent in his room. When Jim entered to see him, the captain had become ill with scarlet fever, a sickness that few people managed to survive at the time.

Jim spent the day tending to the captain and taking care of him. He even brought him exotic plants from up the hill, which should have helped the captain survive the fever.

But it only got worse.

The captain started hallucinating and raving about his old life on the sea again. This time, he didn't call himself a captain or sailor, but a pirate.

Jim was taken aback. He had never met a pirate, but only heard about them from his mother. She'd told him how evil and immoral they were, stealing and killing.

But the notion made Jim curious. Pirate or not, Jim had to help a sick man. He had to take care of his guest somehow.

“Forget about the mermaids or the wonders of the sea,” the captain said, coughing and vomiting. “Forget about the whales and the fish,” he continued, while Jim wiped the man’s sweat from his brow. “There is only one thing you should fear if you ever sail the seas, Jim,” the man grabbed Jim on his sleeve. “One man!” he coughed in Jim’s face. Jim looked away so he wouldn’t catch the fever. “A man with one leg.”

“One leg?” Jim’s eyes widened. “Why would I fear a helpless man with one leg?”

“He has a substitute leg for it,” the captain said. “It’s made of whale bones. Don’t let his appearance ever fool you. With that one leg, he can run, hunt, and kill faster than anyone you have ever seen.”

“Why are you telling me about him, Captain?” Jim felt uneasy.

The pirate contemplated in silence, and then said, “My real name, Jim, isn’t Captain.”

“Of course it isn’t,” Jim chuckled with closed eyes. “No one’s real name is Captain.” And probably no one’s real name is Black Dog.

“My real name is Billy Bones.” The captain didn’t let go of Jim’s sleeve. “I was second in command to someone named Captain Flint on a huge ship. Remember those names, Jim!”

Jim was utterly confused. Who were those pirates, and why had Billy Bones even cared to come to Jim’s small and abandoned island?

And who was the man with one leg?

Before Jim could ask, Billy Bones lost consciousness and fell asleep. Jim hoped the man hadn’t died from the fever. He puffed the gas lamp to a sleep and closed the door, hoping tomorrow he’d get the whole pirate story straight.

The next morning Jim went out to the beach, thinking about all the things the captain had told him. Jim, who once was overly naive, began putting the puzzle together. Black Dog didn't just sail away. His small ship still rocked to the waves by the shore. The captain must have killed him, and buried him somewhere near the beach — or worse, buried him in the endless sea.

If that was true, then there was something big happening on the island. Not only was Billy Bones a pirate, but all of the sailors who came to the island probably were.

They wouldn't come to Admiral Benbow's Inn to rest. They were planning something. Or something had already been planned and was about to be executed.

As much as Jim loved the sea, he felt something wicked was about to happen. He didn't want to put his mother in danger. He was supposed to take care of her after his father's death.

Jim, the fisherman's son, decided to confront the captain, and if necessary, ask him to leave the island.

As Jim stood up and was walking back to the inn, he stumbled over something and fell. Picking himself up, he checked what it was. Then he saw it. Black Dog's dead corpse half-buried in the sand.

Jim ran back to the inn, hoping his mother hadn't been harmed in any way. Once he reached it, he picked up his father's rifle, which he had no idea how to use, and pointed it ahead as he climbed up the stairs to Billy Bones' room.

Jim kicked the room's door open, waving the heavy rifle, and shouted, "Billy Bones! You have to leave!"

But Billy Bones said nothing. His head had fallen over onto the table where he sat, still gripping the bottle of whiskey in one hand. Jim approached him, determined to wake the drunk pirate. He shook him twice, but Billy Bones didn't wake up. The third time Jim poked the man, Billy Bones fell off the table.

The pirate was dead.

Did someone kill Billy Bones, or did he just die from the fever?

Jim realized he had little time. Whoever had sent Black Dog after Billy Bones was going to send another pirate… and another.

What was it that the other pirates wanted from Billy Bones, and what was it he had killed Black Dog for?

Jim rummaged through the room until he found a chest underneath Billy Bones' bed. He hadn't seen it before. The man must have snuck it in at night. Jim tried to pull it open, but it just wouldn't budge. And it was heavy. It seemed like it would hold something precious.

Jim spent the day trying to open it again and again but couldn't, until it occurred to him to look in Billy Bones' pockets. And there it was. A key. A golden one. A bit oversized, and with many zigzags.

Jim tucked the key into the chest's keyhole. This time it cranked open.

The chest was full of things, none of them were gold or silver - or pearls. Nothing precious, really. Only a map that Billy Bones had tucked carefully at the bottom.

Jim rolled the map open and stared at it. He'd never seen a real map before, and could hardly read it. But it wasn't hard to spot the 'X' marked in red. It had to mean something. Then there was a small slip of paper. It said: *Beware of the man with one leg.*



The following day, Jim stood atop the inn, looking for pirate ships that might be looking for Black Dog or Billy Bones. Jim hadn't told his mother about any of this, and let her consider the captain's death an unfortunate coincidence.

But then he had to tell someone about the map, or he wouldn't have the chance to use it. A man named Squire Trelawney, who was the head of the council on Jim's small island, listened eagerly to him. The man owned a few ships and was the wealthiest on the island.

"You know what kind of map this is, Jim?" Trelawney said.

Jim shook his head. All he knew was that X marked the spot. But the spot for what?

“This is a treasure map,” Trelawney said.

“Treasure map?” Jim’s eyes widened.

“Yes, Jim.” Trelawney clicked his fingers. “If we sail across the sea and follow those lines of latitude and longitude, we will end up on an island with a great treasure. A treasure of gold, pearls, and the rarest of jewels.”

“What are lines of latitude and longitude?” Jim wondered.

“They are lines that guide us through the sea,” Trelawney said. “Like the alley and hedges you have memorized to find your way back home from the beach.”

“There are lines drawn on the sea’s surface?” Jim shrugged.

“No, Jim,” Trelawney said. “They are imaginary. We use a certain instrument to find those lines. Sailors know all about them.”

“I didn't know there was a map of the sea," Jim considered. "So can we sell that treasure when we find it?” Jim wondered again. “Can I renovate my mother’s inn if we get that treasure?”

Trelawney laughed and brushed his hand through Jim’s hair. “You won’t need the inn anymore if we find that treasure.” Then he stopped, his facial features dimming. “But we can’t be sure it’s a true map. So many treasure maps have been found, most of them faux and misleading.”

“Are you saying we won’t go after the treasure?” Jim moaned.

“Sailing is expensive, Jim,” Trelawney said. “I need more proof that this map is authentic.”

“Proof?” Jim was about to scream and pull his hair. “Two pirates died for the map, and you still think it’s not real?”

Trelawney thought it over. He was an old man with no wife or children, eager for one last adventure before he died. He just needed proof of the map’s authenticity. He was a practical man. But now that Jim seemed to have convinced him, he worried about something else. “If pirates are

looking for this map, then it’s even worse. This map could get us killed, Jim.”

Jim couldn't argue this time. As much as he was dying to sail away, he had experienced two killings in a few days. It seemed really hard surviving among pirates. But then, if the pirates really needed the map, they would be coming to the island looking for it anyways.

It was a confusing matter. Jim decided to go back and help his mother for now. Trelawney promised him he would look into it. He said that if he found a strong and reliable crew, he might change his mind and go after the treasure. Right now, he had to sail into the sea, looking for brave sailors who weren’t afraid of pirates.



Thirteen days later, Trelawney returned with the news. He was so excited for the treasure hunt, claiming he’d found a hell of a crew. Brave men who were experienced with the sea. Men who feared no pirates.

“I’m so excited as well,” Jim said. “When will we go after the treasure?”

“I’m not sure you should come, Jim,” Trelawney said. “Your mother needs you.”

“No. No!” Jim said. It was true his mother needed him, but she would understand, especially if he told her he would return with a piece of the treasure, enough to better their lives and fix the Inn. “I have to come, Mr. Trelawney. Please.”

“I don’t know about that…” Trelawney didn’t finish his words, as a man burst laughing into the room. Jim stood looking at him with his mouth and eyes wide open.

The man was tall. He wore a black beard. He was muscular and his laugh shook the portraits on the walls. He seemed to know Trelawney well, as he gestured at him. Jim was about to like this flamboyant man right away. Only one thing turned everything upside down and sent shivers into Jim’s spine. The man had one leg.

“Meet Long John Silver!” Trelawney said to Jim. He was proud and fascinated with Long John.

There was a long moment of silence, Jim staring at Long John and his substitute leg—made of a whale bones.

Long John seemed aware of Jim’s reluctance. A thin smirk curved his lips, too thin for Trelawney to notice, but enough to make Jim realize that Long John and Jim recognized each other, although they had never met before.

Had Billy Bones or Black Dog managed to tell someone about the boy in the inn before they died?

Jim was about to expose the man with one leg to Trelawney, as he had never told him about his part of the story, but Long John interrupted first. “And who’s this young and brave boy?” he said, still laughing.

“That’s Jim,” Trelawney introduced him. “The boy who found the map.”

“Jim!” Long John hailed and pulled the boy with one hand in the air. He was definitely a strong man. Momentarily, this move reminded him of his father who used to lift him up in the air when they caught a big fish. “You have to come with us and find the treasure.”

“Really?” Jim squinted. Suddenly he had second thoughts about exposing the one-legged man. He was his only hope for getting on that ship now.

As much he had been warned of him, the man looked too merry to be evil.

“But – “ Trelawney began.

“Don’t say anything,” Long John shushed him. “The young boy found the map. He should come and have the lion’s share when we find it. Right, Jim?”

“What’s the lion's share?”

“A big fat piece of the treasure.” Long John laughed.

Jim said nothing. It was hard to argue with Long John’s glowing spirit.

“Well, if you say so,” Trelawney said. “Meet Long John, Jim. He is our brave sailor who doesn’t fear pirates.”

“Really?” Jim eyed him.

“And I’m also the cook,” Long John said. “I love to cook. What would you like to eat, Jim?”

“Can you cook a whale, Long John?” Jim’s eyes glittered.

“Don’t call me Long John.” He laughed. “Only strangers call me that. You’re my new friend, young man. Call me what my friends call me."

"And what do your friends call you?"

"Ahab.”

“Captain Ahab,” Trelawney interfered.

“Just Ahab,” Long John said. “And don’t ask me why. It’s a long story. And I can cook a whale, but not now, Jim. One day I will cook that whale who took my leg away, and we’ll eat it together.” He laughed again. It was a strong man's laugh, not trying to lighten up or sweeten the talk. He seemed to be just a happy one-legged man with a flamboyant posture. It was impossible not to admire the man for being so merry about his own misery. Jim was sure this couldn't be the man Billy Bones had warned him about.

Jim was infatuated with the man.

“A whale bit your leg?” Jim asked.

“A bad, bad whale.” Captain Ahab winced a little. “I have given him a name. Moby Dick.” He laughed louder, pain shaping his curving lips.

Jim didn’t digest most of this. All he knew was that he was about to go back home and tell his mother that he was about to embark on the greatest adventure in his life. He was about to sail with Captain Ahab’s crew on his Pequod whaler, looking for the most sought after treasure in the world.

Trelawney explained how he was going to sail next to them on his own ship the Hispaniola, as Captain Ahab’s ship was what they called a whaler, a smaller ship only made to hunt whales.

Jim couldn't believe his life was about to change. He was about to become a real man, like his father.

Back at the inn, his mother needed a lot of persuading by Trelawney to let Jim sail along. Like usual, she resisted the idea of Jim leaving the island. He began to understand that she knew something about Jim's destiny. A future he began to slightly worry about.

Surprisingly, it was Captain Ahab’s charming attitude that convinced her. She even went as far as telling him he reminded her of her deceased husband. Captain Ahab cooked for her and told her not to worry. Jim was the brave fisherman’s son who would soon return to her with gold and pearls.

Everything was set, and Jim was about to embark on an adventure that would be repeatedly mentioned in both fiction and history books alike later in life. Historians, and fiction writers would later tell the story, calling it Treasure Island. A book that children loved and scholars loved to teach in school. A larger than life adventure about a brave young boy, a one-legged man, and an ensemble of pirates.

Except that all of them got it wrong. Few people in the world know the true events of this adventure. One of them is me. I think it's time to continue this story in first person.

Why? Because from here on I'll be telling the story no one else knows about. My story. The boy you were told is called Jim Hawkins. It's not my real name. But it’s too soon to talk about now.

Now it's time to continue the story, which is about to get personal.

Bloody personal.



The ship I embarked on was huge. I had never seen anything like it on the shores of my island. So many men, much taller and stronger than me, were on board. They were all tanned like Billy Bones. Scruffy, dirty, with long beards and piercings in their ears and nose. Their bodies buried in tattoos.

They almost looked like I had imagined pirates would look. Trelawney said that was because they had been pirates in the past, and now have repented and become good people. Those were the only members who'd be strong enough to stand up to the real pirates looking for the treasure.

The first few days I suffered from sea hallucinations and dizziness. I couldn't walk on board or be of any help, although I loved the sea tremendously.

But it wasn't for long. Soon, I got used to sailing the sea.

One day, I found my new obsession on the ship. Apples.

It turned out that part of the ship's voyage, and also to help raise more money, was trading apples and selling them at the shore of faraway lands.

The thing was that these weren't just ordinary apples. They were so delicious, so red from inside, juicy and sweet. The sailors called them Blood Apples. And I loved them so much.

Each night I'd climb out of my bed after midnight and steal out on board, on my way to the barrels where they kept the apples. All barrels were labeled, 'Styria', which I came to learn was the name of a mysterious city in Austria. A city where a family called the Karnsteins came from. None of the sailors ever explained why this family was so important, so I let it go. After all, we were here for the treasure, weren't we?

One night, I spent all night gorging on the delicious apples. I sat atop one of the barrels, dangling my legs and staring at the endless sea. The moon shone full that night. It didn't look like the moon I used to see on my home island. It looked... Well... It looked alive.

Then I began to hear melodies. Soft hymns, like a distant song carried on the wings of breezes. Beautiful ones actually. I stopped midway from biting on an apple, my mouth agape and my ears focused.

What was that song?

Was it actually a song?

It baffled me that no matter how many times I listened to the song, I couldn't remember it. Like some kind of a dream. One that affected me, but

I could never recall when I woke up.

“Hey,” a female voice called.

I dropped the apple, looking around me. There wasn’t anyone with me on this part of the ship.

“Hey.”

I realized the voice came from the sea. My mother had once told me about ghosts and apparitions. She said they hide behind the curtains of mist surrounding travelers’ ships.

I began to sweat, clinging to the barrel I sat upon.

“Don’t be afraid,” the voice said. “We love you.”

Squinting, I saw a silhouette of a girl rising from the sea. Only the upper part of her body was visible. She was naked, but her long hair dangled down over her chest.

“We’re the mermaids of the Seven Seas,” she said, her eyes twinkling in the dark. “We know who killed your father.”

I was afraid of her, but curiosity got the best of me. I let go of the barrel and stepped forward. If I could really see how she looked.

“You do?”

“We do,” she whispered. “Do you want to know, Jim?”

“I do.”

“Then come closer.”

I took another step.

“Closer.”

Then another.

“Not close enough.”

My feet dragged me toward her, although I knew I’d regret it. I reached a point where she was an arm’s length away. A place where the moon lit her

face. What a beautiful girl she was.

“Look at you,” she said. “A young, brave boy who has no idea who he is, or what he’s destined to do.”

I didn’t quite understand, but didn’t have the guts to speak. I hadn’t seen such a beautiful girl before.

“We will take care of you,” she said.

“We?”

A number of other mermaids rose from beneath the sea. All as beautiful as her.

“Who are you?” I asked again.

“I told you. We’re the mermaids who’re going to guide you on your journey.”

“To Treasure Island?” I know I sounded eager.

They snickered. “If you want to call it that.”

“It’s not called Treasure Island?”

“That’s one of its names. It’s known by another, and more important name,” she said. “But it doesn’t matter now. What matters is how your father died.”

“Was it a whale?”

“Far from it.”

“Did he drown in the sea?”

“We wish that were true.”

“Then who killed my father?” I fisted a hand.

“The real question is: what are you going to do about it if we tell you?”

“I will…” I fisted the other hand.

“Kill him?” the mermaid snickered.

I shrugged. The thought had never crossed my mind before. All I cared about was to know who killed my father. It never occurred to me what I was going to do about it. “Just tell me who.”

“What’s the point of knowing, if you’re not going to do anything about it?”

“What do you suggest I do?” I found myself asking.

“Slit his throat, maybe?” she snickered.

“Hang him from a noose,” another one said behind her.

“Or maybe,” a third said. “stab him with that knife your father gave you.”

I found myself grabbing for the knife, the only thing my old man ever bothered giving me.

“Maybe he knew,” the mermaid in the front suggested. “He knew he’d get killed and wanted you to avenge him.”

“Are you saying the knife is a clue?”

“Why else would he give it to you?”

I didn’t know what to say but, “Who killed my father?” I tensed.

This made the mermaids laugh in unison. One of them summersaulted in the sea, feeling festive about my anger.

“What is this?” I said. “Why are you happy I’m angry?”

“Anger is beautiful,” they said. “Anger propels one to achieve things.”

“I’m leaving,” I said, hoping I was hallucinating them. A tickle of evil had started to rise in me, and I didn’t like it.

“No. Wait.”

“What now?” I turned back.

“We’ll tell you who killed your father, and how to kill him, only if you do something for us.”

Now things made sense. My mother had always told me that nothing on the Seven Seas was free. That everything had a price. And I was dying to know what happened to my father.

“What do you want?”

“The one-legged man,” her tone darkened.

“Captain Ahab?”

“Or Long John Silver, whatever his real name is.”

“What about him?”

“We want him,” the mermaids hummed as if in an unholy prayer. “We want the man with the one leg.”

“Why?” I squinted. Curious.

“Because she wants him,” a mermaid in the back said. “She who will rule the world.”

“Shhh,” the mermaid in front stopped her. “He doesn’t need to know that much,” she turned back to me. “Listen, Jim. We love you. You must know that.”

I stepped back. “I don’t believe you. How am I supposed to give you Captain Ahab? He is a big man.”

They laughed. “You don’t need to bring him, Jim. Just bring us his pipe.”

“Pipe?”

“Yes, the one he smokes day and night. The one he sometimes plays music with.”

I had seen him use this pipe occasionally. I’d also heard sailors say it produced melodies as much as smoke. “Is that all you want?”

“That’s it,” the mermaid said. “But don’t think it’s easy. A big whale tried to take this pipe from him and couldn’t.”

“Is that the whale who took his leg?”

“That’s the one, Jim. It failed to take the pipe, but not his leg,” she laughed again.

“Why is this pipe important?”

“It makes beautiful melodies,” she said. “And as you can see, we’re all about melodies. We sing while swimming in the sea. Men can’t resist our songs, and once they’re tempted, we appear to them. We’re so beautiful we bring tears to their eyes, and then, once they approach us, we…”

“Eat them,” I said, stepping back. “But you haven’t tried to eat me. Why?”

“Because you’re important, Jim. So important you don’t know it.”

“Everyone says that. Is that because I found the treasure map?”

“No, Jim. You were destined to find the treasure anyway,” she said. “You’re going to be the most famous boy in the world. Captain Ahab knows this. That’s why he took you on board. Don’t trust him.”

It made sense. Everyone warned me of him.

“I need to know more about the pipe,” I demanded, out of curiosity.

“It once belonged to a god named Pan,” she said. “He used it to build a world, woven out of melodies, but someone stole the pipe from him.”

“Captain Ahab?”

“Yes.”

“And if I bring it to you, you will tell me who killed my father?”

“Promise.”

I didn’t much believe them, but the possibility of knowing who killed my father drove me mad. I left them, promising I would do it. I was going to get the pipe from Captain Ahab.



Spying on Ahab wasn't as hard as I thought. I was the youngest boy on the ship, and practically useless. No one paid attention to me. I didn't find it hard to hide and follow him around without anyone seeing me. I even hid in a closet inside his room and overheard a conversation between him and Captain Smolett, one of his men.

"Are we close?" Captain Ahab asked, smoking his pipe.

"No. We're still lost at sea," Smolett said. "The map is eluding us. We're not sure we're reading it properly."

"Are you saying Billy Bones tampered with it?"

"I think there is some kind of code we can't read. The X-marks-the-spot isn't right."

"Explain yourself, Smolett." Ahab didn't sound as friendly as I knew him to be before.

"The X is meant to send us nowhere, to a place where no island exists," Smolett explained. "I sent my men in a smaller boat to the destination. They found nothing."

"So the map is false?"

"I don't think so. It's just that we're not reading it the way it's supposed to be read."

Ahab stared at the map with intent. "Do you think the boy knows?"

"Jim?"

"You know that's not his real name," Ahab said. "Just call him 'the boy' now."

I was about to throttle out of the closet and ask him what he meant. How was Jim not my real name?

"I don't think the boy knows," Smolett said. "He doesn't look bright to me."

Now I was going to burst out and kick this Smolett in the groin. But I kept calm, gritting my teeth. I needed the pipe to know about my father. I

didn't care much about the treasure anymore.

“That’s what puzzles me about him,” Ahab said. “If he is who I think he is, how come he is so naive?”

Even Ahab thought I wasn’t bright? I realized I was disappointed. I realized I had begun to like Ahab.

“Maybe it’s not him,” Smolett said.

“I know it’s him,” Ahab said. “I know he is our key to the island. Maybe we should give him time to examine the map. Billy Bones may have left a clue, one that only the boy can read.”

I fumbled with the idea in my head. Did Billy Bones hint to something unusual about the map? I don’t remember him telling me about how to read the map.

“I will take care of it,” Ahab said. “Let me talk with the boy.”

“I hope you do, or we’ll lose the treasure,” Smolett said. “This sack means the world to your men outside.”

Sack?

“I know,” Ahab puffed his pipe. “But why are you sure it’s a sack?”

“Legends says it is,” Smolett said. “A sack with seven items that are as precious as the sun and moon combined.”

“It’s just a myth, Smolett,” Ahab said. “I’d prefer the treasure to be pearls – that, we can sell.”

“Believe what you want. It’s the quest we all have to take that matters.”

“Of course,” Ahab nodded. “Now get back to your men, and don’t forget to remind them of Moby Dick. I know we’re here for the treasure, but whoever helps me kill this whale will have my share of the treasure.”

“Understood,” Smolett said on his way out. Then he stopped. “Why is it so important you kill that whale, Ahab? You still have your pipe.”

“The whale still has my leg,” Ahab said. “I’m not used to being taken from. I will always hunt you and kill you and drink your blood from a boot if you dare take anything from me.”

I shook, so loud I risked being exposed.

Smolett left, and then Ahab went to sleep, leaving the pipe on the table. It was my only chance.

I will always hunt you and kill you and drink your blood from a boot if you dare take anything from me.

How assuring!

I waited until Ahab slept. But then I was too scared to reach for the pipe, although it was only strides away. To be play it safe, I waited until Ahab began snoring. That's when people were in deep sleep, right? Or was it that he just had breathing problems? My mother once told me about a demon called Snore who was short and stocky but extremely heavy. Snore sat on people's chests while they slept. It was the reason why people snored.

So, I couldn't bring myself to reach for the pipe. I had to wait until Ahab turned and faced the other way. That was when I felt I could do it.

Slowly, I pushed open the closet’s door and tiptoed into the room. Ahab wheezed out a loud snore all of a sudden.

I had to stop in an awkward position, one foot off the ground and one hand almost reaching for the pipe. I looked like a Greek statue, only with worried eyes looking sideways.

Ahab's snores slowly diminished to rugged waves of breathing.

Carefully, I stepped down and reached for the pipe. It was heavier than it looked. I tucked it in my pocket. All I needed was to leave the room out of the open window and go find the mermaids.

"Why not use the door?" came the voice behind me.

I stopped. Not turning around, reminding myself of Ahab's words about being unforgiving about betrayal.

"I—" I was thinking of an explanation.

"Needed the pipe to practice your musical talents?" Ahab said. I could hear the bed creak underneath him. He was coming for me. "Relax boy. I won't hurt you."

This made me turn around. The big man sat on a chair next to the table, pouring himself a drink.

"Really?" I grimaced.

"Come over here," he said. "Have a drink with me."

"I'm too young for drinking, sir."

Ahab shot me a look and gulped down his whiskey. "You really have no idea who you are, do you?"

I wondered why he asked me that. The mermaid had mentioned a similar statement. "I know who I am, sir. I am Jim Hawkins. My father is Admiral Benbow. He died trying to find a fish."

"All of this is true." Ahab laughed. The things that hung on the walls shook again. "But only until we reached the island."

"Treasure Island? Why? What happens on the island?"

"The island is a scary place, Jim," Ahab said. "Not only does it contain a treasure, but it has the power to change us."

"Change us how?"

"That's what no one knows for sure."

"But you said I will have a different name there."

"You will."

"How do you know that?"

"A woman who lives in a high tower amidst the sea."

"How is there a tower amidst the sea?"

"You talk too much, Jim." Ahab stood up. I immediately realized his connection to Billy Bones and Black Dog. The one-legged man they both

feared. But it puzzled me why he was so nice to me. "Come closer. Sit. I'm only joking."

I did. Reluctantly. Still clinging to his pipe in my hand. "What will be my name on the island, and how do you know I will have a different name?"

"It's an old prophecy," he said. "Could be wrong though."

"You seem to believe it."

"I do, Jim." He tapped his glass. "I do."

"Why do you believe in it?"

"Because I believe in the treasure on the island." He leaned forward. "And part of the prophecy dictates that only you, Jim, can find it."

"Me?"

"The prophecy said that an orphan boy who lives with his mother in an inn on a faraway island will be given the map to the treasure. And here you are, Jim. The boy must be you."

I didn't know what to say. It explained why others told me the same thing back on the island. It explains why mother didn't want me to leave. But to be honest, I've felt attached to this journey from day one. It felt like my destiny. I couldn't explain why.

"What else did the prophecy say about me?" I asked.

This is when I saw the powerful Captain Ahab shrug like I have never seen him before. He tapped his glass, evading my eyes. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. Tell me why you took the pipe."

Even though I hadn’t planned on telling him earlier, I began speaking. Something about Ahab made me do it. "The mermaids told me to."

Ahab smiled.

"Why are you smiling?"

"At the fact that the mermaids didn't eat you already. It proves you're the special one."

"Aren't you going to ask me why I agreed on doing it?"

"I know, Jim. You want to know who killed your father."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I know how the mermaids think."

"So are they telling the truth?"

"There is nothing so mysterious about your father's death. Even the sailors on this ship know who killed your father."

I furrowed my eyebrows for the lack of words.

"You see, Jim. The man who killed your father is vicious and feared. That's why no one dared to tell you. They don't want to have anything to do with him."

"How vicious?"

"He believes he has the right to kill who he likes, and spare who he dislikes."

"Is it you?" I rapped a hand on the table.

Ahab laughed again, my hand shaking on the table. "No, it's not me, Jim."

I sat down, not sure if I believed him. "So why do the mermaids want your pipe?"

"The pipe of Pan is a precious thing," he said. "But the mermaids want it because they want to kill me with it."

"How so?"

"There is a certain song that, only if played on my pipe, will kill me."

I stared at the pipe in my hands, and realized I may have the instrument to kill him if he killed my father.

"Don't bother, Jim. You don't know the melody." He tapped his leg on the floor.

"Why do the mermaids want you dead?"

"Moby Dick sent them."

"The whale?"

He nodded. "He wants to kill me before I kill him. And the mermaids love chaos and blood anyway."

The world in the Seven Seas seemed complicated to me. Back home all we cared about was the salt and bread we put on the table by the end of the day.

"So what now?" I said.

"Now you have a choice, Jim," he said. "Either give the pipe to the mermaids, or take my side against them. Either way, I will tell you who killed your father right now."

"But I don't even need you to tell me now. I could ask any of the sailors about my father's killer."

"No one will tell you but me. They're too scared, remember?"

I had to think it over. Who did I trust, the mermaids or Captain Ahab? It seemed like I couldn't trust any of them.

But Ahab needed me for the treasure, so he was going to tell me. Slowly, I handed him his pipe back.

"Thank you, Jim." He put his drink away and began to smoke the pipe. "You don't know what it means to me."

"Now, tell me who killed my father."

"A man who thinks he is Fate, killing people and sparing others left and right."

"His name?"

"Captain Hook."

"Where can I find him?"

"Why do you want to find him?"

"I will kill him." I grabbed my knife. A strange lust for blood was growing inside my thirteen-year-old soul.

Ahab looked impressed. He brushed his beard with his hand. "You can't kill Fate, Jim."

"You said he only thinks he is Fate."

"But he has proven nothing but being Fate itself so far. It’s puzzling, I know."

"Are you saying I can't avenge my father?"

"I said you can't kill Fate. I didn't say you can't use him.”

Ahab smiled, evil shaping the features of his face. I smiled back, evil crawling under my skin.



Ahab’s offer was a devious one for a thirteen-year-old. Right now, I can openly describe it as my first step into evil doing — something I cured myself from years later, but after I’d caused a lot of damage.

What happened was that I went back to the mermaids. I waited by the barrel of apples until they began to sing again. Slowly, they appeared to me.

“Did you get it Jim?” the mermaid asked.

“I have it,” I said, biting on a blood apple. “But I want something in return.”

“We promise you we will tell you who killed your father.”

“I already know that. It’s Captain Hook.”

The mermaid looked upset. “Who told you that?”

“It doesn’t matter who,” I said. “What matters is that I know.”

“I’m afraid someone is messing with you head, Jim. We had a deal.”

“The deal changed.”

“I hope you didn’t talk to Ahab. He is a devious man.”

“I didn’t,” I lied. “It has nothing to do with him. Besides, I got his pipe.”

The mermaids exchanged looks. I could see how ugly they could turn if I upset them further. I could smell their hatred in the air. “So what do you want in return, Jim?”

“The way to Treasure Island.” That was my deal with Ahab. He me told how the mermaids were Fate’s ears in the sea. They practically worked for him. Why kill Captain Hook when his mermaids, whom he cherished, could point me to where the treasure was? Ahab had convinced me that my father would have liked me doing this; finding the treasure and making my mother rich. That it was the best revenge.

“It’s not called Treasure Island,” the mermaid puffed. “You don’t know what you’re doing.”

“Whatever it’s called, I need to get there.”

“Why?”

“To get rich. I know you know how to get there.”

“We do,” she said. “But haven’t you asked yourself why we didn’t get the treasure ourselves?”

“Because you are mermaids. You love the sea.”

They laughed, calling me naive.

“Look, Jim,” she said. “The price you’re asking for is too high for the pipe.”

“Really?” I stood up threw the unfinished apple away. “Is killing Ahab not enough of a price?”

“Now we know you must have talked to him.”

“How did I talk to him if I have his pipe?” I raised my hand, showing it to them. “He wouldn’t just give it to me.”

Thy way they shrieked upon seeing it was indescribable. I wondered what it really meant to them. Was it that important?

“All right, Jim,” the mermaid in the front said. “Calm down. Whatever you do, don’t whistle the pipe, understand?”

“Why would I? I have no interest in it.”

“You just think so. It can control you in ways you have never seen.”

“This pipe?” I stared at it and laughed, unbeknownst to me that by giving me the pipe, Ahab had led me on the first road of evil. I didn’t know it had already begun to control me.

“We’ll show you the way to the island,” she agreed, “just hand it over.”

“Not before you tell me. Point at it on the map.”

“Forget the map,” the mermaid said. “The way to the island isn't the map.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m sure Ahab told you they’ve been sailing to the right coordinates and never finding the island.”

“Yes.” I remembered the conversation between Ahab and Smolett.

“You know why they couldn’t find it?”

“It’s the wrong map?”

“No, Jim. Think. You need to use your mind more.”

“What do you mean? The coordinates must have been wrong.”

“No, they’re right. But none of the pirates ever found it.”

“That’s puzzling. How so?”

“Because the island doesn’t want them to find it,” she said.

“What kind of nonsense is that?” I began to lose my temper.

“The island has a soul.”

“You’re playing with my head. I will not tolerate this any longer.”

“I’m not lying,” she said. “Use your mind and think of the only soul in the sea that is as big as an island and still can disappear in a flash of an eye.”

“I hate puzzles,” I said. “And I’ve never seen a soul as big as an island.”

“But you have heard about it.”

The mermaids behind her began splashing their tails onto the water. It took me a while, but I finally got it. “Are you saying the island is a…”

“A whale, Jim. Yes. That’s why it disappears whenever one of those pirates on your ship try to find it.”

“They’re not pirates. They’re sailors.”

“So they let you believe,” she said, nearing the edge. “See? I told you things you have never thought were possible. Now, hand me the pipe.”

“No,” I insisted. “I want to know more. I still want to find the whale. If it’s the island and has my treasure on its back, I want to find it.”

“There is only one way to find it, Jim.”

“Tell me. What is it?”

“If you kill Ahab.”

“What?” I grimaced. “Why?”

“Because the whale is Moby Dick, Jim,” she said. “Captain Ahab, also known as Long John Silver, isn’t after the treasure. Sure, he wouldn’t mind finding it, but he is after…”

“Moby Dick,” I said. Things began to make sense now.

“No ship with Ahab on board will find the island,” she said. “That’s why he has you on board. Because the whale will show itself to you but not Ahab.”

“Why me?”

“Because you’re special, Jim.”

“Everyone keeps telling me that and I don’t understand why.”

“Once you know your real name and the real name of the island you will understand.”

“Why don’t you tell me then?” I was getting frustrated.

“We can’t. The island won’t let us. The island — and you — have a greater purpose in life.”

“So what now? How do I get there?”

“If you kill Ahab, the island will show itself to you. But you can’t kill him because you don’t know the song you need to play on the pipe,” she said. “This is why you have to give it to us, so we can kill him.”

Everything became too confusing all of a sudden. *What was I really doing here?* I kept asking myself. At first I wanted to avenge my father, then Ahab messed with my head and persuaded me to look for the treasure. Which wasn’t so bad, because I thought my father must have been looking for the treasure as well. The faerie with the pearl hiding inside a fish must have been part of that treasure on the island.

But how come the trail of events led me to me having to kill someone?

“What are you waiting for?” the mermaid said. “You give us the pipe, we kill Ahab, then you lead this ship to the island, and you get the treasure your father had been looking for.”

I wondered if the mermaids read people’s minds. This was what I was just thinking. “Who said my father was looking for the treasure?”

“Don’t you know your father died chasing a faerie inside a fish?”

“So?”

“Why do you think he wanted to catch the faerie?”

“Because she’d swallowed one of the most precious pearls in the world.”

Now the mermaids laughed again. A laugh that scared me.

“You’re so naive, Jim,” the mermaid said. “The faerie knew the way to the island. That’s why your father hunted it.”

More things began to fall into place. With every new revelation, I realized how naive I was. “Then why did Captain Hook kill my father?”

“We can’t answer that, Jim,” the mermaid said. “Not now. There’s a lot you will know later.”

“I want to know now!” I waved the pipe in the air, threatening to throw it away.

“As you wish,” the mermaid surrendered. “The faerie wasn’t inside a fish, Jim. It hid inside Moby Dick himself, only sailors and fools thought it was inside a small fish in the sea.”

“So, Captain Hook killed my father because he thought he found the faerie, thus he found the island?”

“Now you get it. Everyone is looking for the island.”

“Even Captain Hook? Isn’t he Fate?”

“He is, but he only knows so much.”

I thought about all the rumors I heard in the past. “Is this island the Kingdom of Sorrow?”

“We can’t say, Jim.” The mermaid waved a hand in the air. “Even if you threaten to throw away the pipe. Now, just give it to us so we can kill Ahab and you find your island. Your destiny.”

“No,” I said.

“No?” the mermaid growled.

“If the island is my destiny, then I will find it anyways” I stepped back near the barrels full of apples. “You just said that.”

The mermaids began to moan and curse my name. The transition from beautiful mermaids to beastly sirens was horrible. I was almost going to wet my pants. I stumbled back and fell.

Throngs of sailors woke up and came to witness the wailing mermaids. They lit all kinds of fires to light up the night. Some of them were as scared as me. The mermaids began to hum their songs. And the men began to weaken, tempted to touch them.

“Don’t!” I screamed. “They will eat you alive.”

But I was too late.

I couldn’t comprehend how strong men like these fell to their knees and crawled on the ship’s floor toward the mermaids. They just couldn’t resist them.

One by one, blood spattered all over the edges of the ship. I watched Ahab’s men die one after the other.

“Ahab!” I shouted. “Come help the men. Do something!”

Ahab only came when everyone was already dead. The mermaids had sunk deep underwater, and the smell of blood in the ship was sickening.

Ahab laughed aloud. “All this blood.” The one-legged man didn’t seem to care.

“Are you laughing at your dead men?” I burst out.

“Not men, but traitors,” he said, kicking what was left of them out to the sea. “Smolett and his men were planning to throw me off the ship. They got what they deserved.”

“Throw you off?” I couldn’t take the surprises anymore. The world outside my home island was really a strange place.

“Come on, Jim. Don’t tell me the mermaids didn't tell you about the island being Moby Dick and hiding from me.”

“Ah.” I moped my head, realizing what was going on. “Your men were going to kill you for the same reason the mermaids wanted you dead.”

“Everyone is after the treasure on the island.” He snatched his pipe back from my hands and lit it. “All but me. I’m after the island itself.”

“And you used me to get to it.” I grunted.

“You’re still young, Jim.” He smoked his pipe. “You should start to get used to being used. Everyone in this world is using everyone else. It’s how the tides roll in this world.”

I sat down, leaned back against a barrel, and pulled my knees to my chest. Suddenly, I wanted to go back to my mother. Why had I ever left home?

“Don’t give up on me, Jim,” Ahab said. “We need each other. You need to find your destiny. I have to find my whale.”

“I don’t want the treasure anymore.” I began to sob. “I want to go back home. I want to go back to my mother.”

And then, there, in this very dark hour of my life, Ahab told me something that changed me forever. Something so horrible that even now my hands tremble as I write the words. Captain Ahab, Long John Silver, the one-legged man whom Billy Bones warned me of, said, “Your mother is dead, Jim. I killed her with my bare hands before we left, just to make sure you have nothing to go back to. Now, get ready to sail with me. Where else will you go?”



It’s hard to explain the following three years, trapped with a one-legged man, who might be the optimum of all evil, in the same ship. Those years will need another special diary, so you could understand who I have become.

All you need to know is that for three whole years we never came across another ship — not with people still alive on it. Most ships had been robbed by pirates, or Fate himself. Its passengers murdered; you could smell the blood across the ocean waves.

Ahab and I had to resist the mermaids so many times, although both of us seemed immune to their songs. We fought a few whales — none of them was Moby Dick. We survived harsh weather when the ship should have sunk. Ahab smoked his pipe and stared at the moon for long nights. I ate all the apples in the barrel until there was nothing left.

For so many nights, I thought of killing him in his sleep. But I was afraid. Not of him, but of loneliness. A lonely paradise was worse than a hell with enemies. Ahab was a crazy man, obsessed with the whale that took his leg. So obsessed, he easily tolerated the boredom of the sea for three years.

As for me, I worked and learned how to navigate by day, cried myself to sleep, and tolerated the nightmares of my dead mother by night.

It was an awfully long journey that I may detail in that another diary. What should interest you, dear reader, is the night I met the faerie.

She was tiny, the size of my palm. And she had wings and a funny way of speaking. One night, she knocked on my window. I was so scared, until she started swearing at me in her squeaky voice, which made me laugh and realize how tiny she was.

“You weren’t going to open the window for me?” she squeaked. “It’s cold outside.”

“Normally I’d throw you out,” I said. “You’re nothing but a big insect to me.”

“Then why haven’t you?” She rested her tiny hands on her waist and pouted.

“I’m bored.”

“Me, too,” she said. “I’ve been inside the whale for too long. You don’t want to know what happens inside when he burps.”

I laughed. “Are you for real? A fly that talks?”

“I’m not a fly. I’m the faerie your father was looking for, stupid boy.”

I sat and stared at her. “Are you serious?”

“Of course I am,” she said. “And I’m here to show you the way to the island.”

I shut the door to my room and shushed her. Ahab could be listening. “Why haven’t we found you long before?”

“I had to wait for you to turn sixteen,” she said.

“I turned sixteen?” I hadn’t counted the days. I hadn't known I spent so much time with the vicious one-legged man. “Why sixteen?”

“Rules of the island.”

“I’m fed up with all this talk about the island,” I said.

“I know. But it’s time for you to realize who you are and what the island is.”

“Are you going to tease me like everyone else?”

“No, I’m going to tell you, but we have to save a girl first.”

“A girl?” I furrowed my eyebrows. “Haven’t seen a girl in years. Except for the mermaids, if they count as girls.”

“You didn’t ask me who the girl is or why. You talk too much.”

“I know.” I rolled my eyes. “Who is the girl?”

“The price you have to pay to get your treasure.”

“The price? I thought I paid my debt to the sea already.”

“You haven’t,” the faerie said. “The universe will grant you a most precious island. And the universe demands balance.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“The universe will give you access to an incredible treasure, and will ask you to do good things for the boys and girls you will find on the island.”

I didn’t swallow that universe concept, but I kept listening.

“If the universe gives you good, it has to give you bad as well. That’s the balance.”

“Are you saying the girl is the…”

“The bad.” The faerie nodded. “She is a troubled girl. Very troubled. And the universe will demand that you take care of her. In return, you get to find the island without Ahab and anyone else chasing you.”

I stood up and sighed. I was tired of mermaids, pipes, melodies, islands, and secrets. I just needed to get off the boat and start a new life somewhere. I didn't care much for the treasure anymore. "Anything to get to the island," I said. "Just tell me where the girl is."

"On a ship called Demeter," the faerie said.

"I haven't seen a single ship with people alive on it for years."

"This one is no different. But those on it aren't dead. They're sleeping. A long sleep."

"The girl is sleeping, too?"

"Yes. Now follow me."

The faerie helped me leave the boat. I swam in the cold water after her, risking death. But I trusted her, and I still don't know why I did, until today.

She took me to another ship which I couldn't have seen without her glow in the mist.

The Demeter was silent. Finding the girl in a coffin hadn't been hard. The faerie asked me to open the coffin to make sure it was the girl we were looking for.

I did.

The girl took my breath away. Even asleep. Looking pale and dead. It wasn't beauty that drew me toward her. Something else I couldn't explain. As if she were my destiny, too.

"Why is she sleeping?" I whispered.

"Don't ask," the faerie said. "Don't even ask her about her past when she wakes up. She needs a new life, just like you. Now pull her out, gently."

I did, noticing a lot of teeth scattered in the bottom of the coffin. I didn't comment though.

"Where to now?" I said.

"Look." The faerie pointed ahead.

And there I saw it. Finally, after all these years. I saw a whale rising up from the sea, water rocking the ocean around us. It felt like the end of the world. But then the whale settled down and began floating calmly in the water.

I could see palm trees, forest, and even wooden houses from where I stood. “Am I going to be all alone with her on this island?” I asked.

“No,” the faerie said. “Others will arrive. You will be their leader.”

We took a small boat from the ship toward the island. Soon, we arrived at one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen in my life. The island itself. I didn’t even need to find a treasure on it. The island itself was a treasure. So beautiful it brought a tear to my eyes.

“The island is yours,” the faerie said, about to flutter away.

“Wait!” I said, holding the girl in my arms. “I want to know more.”

“Like what?” the faerie asked.

“Who is this girl?”

“Her name is Wendy. Wendy Darling,” the faerie said. “Some call her Sleeping Beauty, but trust me she is hard to live with. You will take care of her as promised, or the universe will curse you.”

“What kind of deal is that?”

“The kind of deal you have to take, or I’ll send you back in the ship with Ahab, and let you relive your hell.”

I said nothing. It was clear I’d succumbed to my fate away from this evil man.

“And the island?” I asked.

“What about it?”

“Is this the Kingdom of Sorrow?”

“No, but this girl in your hands is from the kingdom,” the faerie said. “I believe she will show you how to get there one day. She has unfinished

business to take care of there."

"And this island? You didn't tell me. What's its real name?"

"It's called Neverland, although we prefer to let people think it's called Treasure Island. Better let people think it's a myth."

"We?" I grimaced.

"Later. You don't need to know this now," the faerie said, about to fly away again.

This time she stopped on her own and turned around. "And your name isn't Jim Hawkins."

"So I have been told."

"Your mother wanted to protect you so she named you Jim Hawkins. And your father's name isn't Hawkins nor Admiral Benbow. They did it all to protect you."

"From what?"

"From the likes of Captain Hook and Ahab. You have a lot of enemies, but you could only face them when you found the island. The prophecy says so."

And I'd be waiting for them. One killed my father and other killed my mother. "What does the prophecy say exactly?"

"That Neverland will be the birthplace of good boys and girls who will stand up to the evil forces in the world," the faerie said. "And it will be led by a boy named Peter."

"Peter? Is that my real name?"

The faerie nodded and flew closer. She kissed me on the cheek. "It's a long war you have ahead, Peter. You're the one. And Ahab knew it. Now, I really have to go."

"And leave me alone?"

“You’re not alone, Peter.” She nodded at Wendy. “Didn’t your mother tell you about Adam and Eve? This is a similar story. An even better one,” she flew away.

“But… “ There was too much to comprehend at once. “But I am afraid I can’t take care of her.”

“You will,” she said from afar.

“How about my last name?”

“The prophecy didn’t tell,” the faerie yelled from behind the mist. “How about Peter Piper, as in Ahab’s pipe?”

And that’s the moment when I gave myself a name. “No, it’s Peter Pan,” I said. “Ahab said the pipe belonged to a god named Pan.”

“So you want to be strong as the gods, Peter Pan?” she laughed and said her last words. “Just remember, the gods aren’t all about power, but about love, too.”

The faerie, whom later I knew as Tinker Bell, left. She told me one last thing before she did; that to wake up Wendy I had to kiss her. That was how Sleeping Beauty woke up.

I kissed Wendy, and slowly she opened her eyes. She looked so beautiful in my arms.

Gods are not only about power, but love!

It was an incredible feeling, knowing I had to take care of Wendy. I couldn’t explain. After a long and terrible journey, I was able to give love instead of wanting to take things, like everyone else I met on the journey. No more pipes, mermaids, treasures, hatred, and revenge.

This was me finding the power to give and take care of someone after a series of terribly dark events.

“Where am I?” Wendy said.

“Neverland,” I said.

“Where?”

“An island far away. I will take care of you.”

“Really?” She looked so pale. “I heard your name is Peter Pan?”

“Yes.” I grinned.

“You seem like a nice boy, Peter.”

Now I felt on top of the world.

“Please don’t take this personally,” she said.

“What are you talking about?”

“This.” Wendy craned up her neck and bit me.

It was my first vampire bite. It has pretty much summed up our relationship in Neverland.

End of Diary

MY NOTES

Written by the Beast

Wow, that ending.

To me the resemblance is almost uncanny. The story of Treasure Island does have a lot in common with Neverland. I admit Long John Silver a.k.a. Captain Ahab is starting to give me goose bumps.

But it's prequels like these that make me wonder about the lies some characters say. Didn't Peter Pan save the children and fight the Piper in the Pumpkin Piper? How does this fit with this story about the inception of Neverland? Did it happen after or before?

There is a missing link here.

Or is one of the two prequels marred with lies?

I'm not sure. I need to read more. Still no prequels helping me to know more about my own story.

I picked another up. It's called Lady Bluebeard. I've always been interested to know about Bluebeard. I wonder who he really is.



Grimm Prequel #21

Lady Bluebeard

as told by Angel Von Sorrow

Dear diary,

In the year 1845, decades after the incidents in my late kingdom of Sorrow, I was sitting in a cafe in London, waiting to meet a customer and sell him apples. With my hair cut much shorter and the gentleman's suit I was wearing, no one had the slightest idea of who I was. Just a 19th century apple trader drinking tea like an Englishman, in spite of my terribly-faked English accent.

Of course, I didn't sell Blood Apples anymore. Just the normal, tasteless Granny Smith ones that English men and women loved. I suppressed the need to tell them their apples tasted like dead worms at the bottom of a whiskey bottle when compared to the delicious Blood Apples. But these were the times when every fairytale character feared for their lives, unable to speak out the truth. These were the times when I preferred people calling me Harry instead of Angel.

Thanks to the Brothers Grimm cursing us forever — a story that I'll leave for another diary.

All of us had become nothing but… well… fairy tale characters mentioned in children's books, and no one even believed we existed anymore.

I was wearing my top hat and sipping my tea when I was struck by a ghost from the past. A woman who I hadn't seen in almost forty years.

She wore a bonnet over a hand-sewn silk jacket and quilted petticoat lined with white linen. She walked with grace as if she were a jewel in this rainy Victorian nightmare.

My hands almost dropped my cup of tea, and a lump grew in my throat. All of my insides longed to call for her and even caress her in my arms. I

wanted to rip my clothes, scream from the top of my lungs, and call her by her original name, the one she used to have in the Kingdom of Sorrow.

But I didn't. The price would have been too high for me to pay.

I struggled, cementing myself to my chair, allowing my defeat to weigh my head lower – pretending I hadn't ever known her.

Oh, dear lord, what have the Brothers Grimm done to us? Had we justifiably deserved to be cursed? — well maybe we did but I still would have offered my blood and soul to go back to Sorrow as a pauper, not even a king, if it were possible.

"Mr. Harry," a gentle voice whispered to me. Everyone here believed Harry was my real name.

I raised my head and glanced to my left. It was her, the woman I ignored out of fear. She'd sat down next to me and flung her umbrella open to keep away the drizzling rain that dripped through the cafe's ramshackle roof.

Still, I couldn't say a word.

"Angel," she whispered. "It's all right. The rain has a heavy noise to its trickles. We can talk for a while. No one will hear us."

"I'm waiting for a customer," I shrugged, worried it wasn't a good idea to talk. What if we were exposed? "I'm afraid I will have to ask you to leave."

"I am your customer," she surprised me. "I have to say you're terrible at disguising yourself. I mean 'apple trader'? Again? I found you right away."

"It's the only job I knew," I explained.

"I understand," she let out a silly chuckle. "All the other things you did are mostly considered crimes in London now. A warrior, magician, and king. None of those things pay the bills in this age."

"You forgot being a vampire," I said, sensing the bitter shame on the tip of my tongue.

"That not only doesn't pay the bills, but could get you killed." She winked.

The rain had distorted the beauty of her face before me, so I dug deep into my memories of Sorrow and made a picture of her in my mind. She hadn't changed much. Immortals rarely do.

"It's nice to see you…" I wasn't about to speak her name.

"Bronte," she interrupted me, eyes glancing sideways. "Charlotte Bronte."

It wasn't her real name. She'd changed it, just like I had, so I called her by it. "What are you doing in London, Ms. Bronte?" I made conversation, like two strangers who might have known each other in another life.

"It's Mrs. Bronte," she corrected me. I wasn't surprised. Every fairy tale character who'd survived the Brothers Grimm curse had remarried or found people they could call friends and relatives. I knew Peter Pan lived in Count Dracula's castle in Romania, which was not far, but I had never tolerated Peter. I ended up. Somehow, I ended up the loneliest of all. "And to answer your question, I'm a writer."

I tilted my head, impressed.

"I will publish my first book in about a year," she gripped her umbrella tighter. "My publisher says it's going to do well."

"You always loved books, back in Sorrow."

"True," her eyes found mine through a piercing ray of light, invisible to everyone else.

Oh, the memories. The scent of Sorrow. The scent of my past. Our past. All the good things we had enjoyed and all the terrible things I'd done.

"Do you always drink tea now, Angel?" she asked, as if she'd just read my mind.

"Five times a week," I said. "Blood on weekends." My lips twitched.

But it was true. And it was also a joke. Reality is so dark sometimes, it comes out like a chuckling mess of a bitter comedy. It might make others laugh, even clap, while you're sucking on sorrow from inside. It's every

comedian's story. A comedian tells you about his misery and you, the audience, laugh. That's how he gets paid. That's how he pays the rent.

"Your mind is trailing off again," Charlotte said. "I know that look."

She said the words but I heard something else. Something like, 'My condolences, Angel. Sorry that the human person in you died long ago.'

"I only drink blood from people on their last breath," I felt the need to explain. "Those who have no means to live beyond the hour."

"How can you be sure it's their last breath?" she asked. "Talked to God lately?"

Her words didn't hurt. Her words reminded me of how smart she was. How much I liked her. "No, but I talked to Ladle," I said. "Death herself." I rubbed the rim of my cup. "She was kind enough to provide me with a list of the people she was about to kill for each month."

"You made a deal with Death?" She raised an eyebrow. "A very unusual deal."

"It's morbid, I know." I slightly lowered my head again. Sometimes, I thought I should write an apology on my forehead for all the damage I'd done.

"Not as morbid as my book," she said, shrugging, her eyes looking outward at the rain.

"You're writing a horror?"

"It's debatable," she said. "You can scare people with the monsters in the sea, and you can scare them with the monsters already inside them."

"Poetic." I smirked in a friendly way. It felt good to crack a joke with an old friend. "What's it called?"

"My first book was supposed to be called The Professor," she said. "It was basically my twisted version of you — without mentioning any of our secrets, of course."

"Me?" I said. "Was it good?"

“To me, it was. But my publisher didn’t like it.”

“Any reason why?”

She glanced back, and I could see her looking beyond me, at memories of me back in Sorrow. “The publisher said your story was unbelievable, that it could never happen.”

I smiled. Truth had always been the least appreciated subject in fiction. Lies were the solid roots of a tree called novels. “I assume you wrote another book then, the one you’re about to publish.”

She nodded, the gaze in her eyes proud and worried at the same instance. I’d never seen that look in anyone before, so I couldn’t interpret it.

“Does your new book have a name?”

“Jane Eyre,” Charlotte Bronte told me.

Rest assured, dear reader. You haven’t been surprised yet. And if this unsettles you, stop reading, because what’s coming might shatter your perception of history itself.

“Catchy name,” I said. “Sounds like an interesting woman.”

“She is,” Charlotte’s worries overshadowed her pride now. “I based Jane Eyre on someone both you and I know very well.”

The noisy rain seemed absent now, sucked into a dark river in the back of my mind. I hoped she wasn’t going to mention who I had in mind.

“I based the book on her,” Charlotte said, pointing at her red shoes. I hadn’t noticed them earlier. After all, I’d lived for years in a kingdom where the color red had been forbidden. My senses had developed an uncanny dismissiveness to it when I came across it. Even the blood I sucked from the almost-dying people seemed invisible. Red was the color of pain and its stains burned like a sun inside my cold heart.

“I based the book on her, Angel. Do you remember her?”

I knew Charlotte’s voice was going to haunt me for years — once the novel had become a landmark in the world of literature, except no one had

known it was a book feebly based on a fairy tale character. A woman who had given me nightmares since the night of my birth.

A woman who'd given the world nightmares.

And no, we weren't talking about Death.

"Your publisher liked her story?" I asked.

"Immensely," she said. "He thinks the story will change the way men and women look at each other for the rest of our lives."

"But why, Charlotte? Don't you think readers will recognize who Jane Eyre really was?"

"Not at all. People have the amazing capacity to not notice or connect the dots." She leaned back. "Besides, I didn't tell the whole story. I made Jane Eyre the good girl. It's the man she marries who's the subject of great interest."

"Just like the original story." I closed my eyes, tapping my fingers on the table, still unable to outweigh the noise of the rain. "I like it that you left the darker parts out of the story. No one needs to know."

"Even so, my publisher thinks it's the perfect Gothic novel," she chuckled. "He said it will mesmerize, entice, and also scare the world."

I let out a painful laugh. With so much time on my hands, I had begun to read a few books — Sherlock Holmes being my favorite. Not because of Sherlock's mastery in solving the puzzles, but it was his struggle with cocaine and loneliness that had struck me hard.

"Are you angry with me, Angel?" Charlotte asked.

"Angry, why would I be?"

"I know what she meant to you. It occurred to me you might not want me to retell her story."

"You make it sound like she meant good things to me." I opened my eyes, the blurriness of grey barely making way through the blackness of my memories.

“It’s hard to tell what she really was,” Charlotte argued. “I mean she went through a lot.”

I waved my hand in the air. “Please, Charlotte. If you want to write the book then do it, but don’t make excuses for her.”

“I see.” She seemed gloomy. In fact, she seemed worried. As if the pages of the book she’d written would haunt her for the rest of her life. “Would you like me to read something to you?”

“From the book?”

She was eager enough that her answer came in the shape of a few sheets of parchment she pulled out and placed on the table.

I stared at them, rain threatening to wipe out the ink if not read soon enough. It reminded me of the Books of Sand, like the one I’m using to write this specific diary.

“Either allow me to read it now or let the rain forever wash the words away,” Charlotte said.

I waited, not sure if I wanted her to read a book that was nothing but the origins of all the pain in my life. When I was a young boy, still living in my father’s castle, I used to wish upon the rain instead of the stars. Stars seemed so far away for a child who’d already been intimidated by the tallness of his elders. The rain was closer, more intimate, and though grey, it looked like it wouldn’t hurt me. I loved grey. I think it’s the color of my heart.

And now I let the rain distort and wipe away at the ink, leaving only a couple of sentences untouched. Just like in my childhood, I let it decide which part Charlotte should read.

Charlotte had always been a bright woman. She understood, picked up the parchment and began reading. “I lingered in the long passage which led to his bloody chambers in the castle…” An excerpt from Jane Eyre, unedited.

It felt like the words were pulling out my precious vampire fangs — although some of the exact words in the text had been altered by editors

later.

Charlotte eyed me briefly then continued reading, with passion. “…there was only one little window at the far end of the passage, and looking, with its two rows of small black doors all shut, like a corridor in some Bluebeard’s castle.”

Her last and final words worried me. I glanced into her eyes. “You mentioned Bluebeard? Aren’t you afraid it will expose us and the truth about fairy tales?”

She let out a funny laugh, crumpling the parchment in one hand. “You don’t get it, Angel, do you?” she said. “We’re all fairy tales now. Mentioning Bluebeard will never prove he was real. Believe me, no one will even notice. We’re nothing but every child’s figment of imagination.”

“If so, then why have you contacted me, Charlotte? I find it hard to believe you came to tell me about a novel you wrote.”

She bit her lip, slightly looking down. It took her a moment to look up again, mustering all the courage she had. “You’re right. I came for something else.”

“I hope it’s not what I have in mind.”

“I think it is, Angel,” she said. “I am struggling with some details in the novel. Some details about Jane Eyre and her mysterious husband. I will not spill out vital information, but I want to understand what she really felt.”

“Jane Eyre or… her?”

“Her?” she said. “I want to ask you to retell the whole story to me.”

This almost pushed me to stand up and leave. But sometimes memories are made of chains of steel. They’re like a horror house; open the door and step in and it’s too late to go back before you see a demon smirking at you from the end of the hallway. Memories, if I could only suck the life out of them and kill them forever.

“I’m sorry to ask you this,” Charlotte said, “but I need your help.”

“I know only the things I’ve been told by my father, Night Von Sorrow, which are the things he’s been told by his grandfather and so on.”

“That’ll do.” She reached out and took my hand in hers. “But I also heard you have her diary in a Book of Sand.” She dared look in my eyes. “One that you have never opened to read.”

Her words made me look away from her, but she wouldn’t let go and reached for my other hand as well.

I only realized how cold my hands were from the rain when she took them into the warmth of hers. I was a vampire after all. Pale, cold, and bloody bitterness were my best friends. Angel Von Sorrow was a man of the past, one who was the strongest of all but torn up from the inside like the weakest of all. I think the trick to scaring people is to pretend you have no scars like them.

“Alright,” my voice was softer than the falling rain. “Here it is.” I pulled out a tiny bottle from my pocket in my coat, one that I had never dared to open. She was right.

“What is that?” She pointed at the bottle.

“It’s a Book of Sand.”

At her incredulous look I continued. “I found a way to squeeze the sand into a tiny bottle,” I explained. It’s still the diary you’re looking for.”

“How can I read it?” She sounded eager.

“Just pour the sand on a blank sheet of paper parchment—try to avoid the rain of course.”

A minute later we were inside the cafe, sheltered by a better roof, away from the drizzling rain. She poured the sand on a sheet of parchment she had pulled from her purse. It glittered like gold, then formed sentence after sentence to be read.

“I’d read it as fast as you can,” I offered. “Like any Book of Sand, it will dissolve after you read it.”

“And be gone forever?”

“Not forever. For another hundred years.”

“Do you want to read it with me?” she asked.

“Read it out loud. I will listen.”

“I can’t believe I’m going to read this diary,” she almost gasped. “Will it tell us who Bluebeard really was as well?”

“Whatever it will tell us, I’m sure we’re not going to be the same again after we read it,” I said gloomily, and listened as the first words from the diary left her lips…



My Grandmother’s Diary

Dear Diary,

Yesterday was the day when, unlike every other teenager in my small European town, I declined the Hungarian prince's proposal of marriage. That tall, dark, and handsome forty-something stranger who has an uncanny obsession with music. That strange prince for whom it is said can talk to birds and is rich enough to make God an offer to purchase the world from him. That lean and muscular man who has no well-known origins. That man with the oddly attractive blue beard.

The peasants had said so many things about his beard. That it was hiding a scar on his chin. But why blue? Because he loves the ocean and the sky and the sea. Really? Then, perhaps he dipped it in the ink he wrote his letters with. Unbelievable assumptions and rumors were everywhere. None of them made sense.

Except one. It didn't really make sense, but it was the closest one to having a comprehensible meaning. One of his wives—or victims—had claimed the name was misheard. It was never blue beard. It was bird. That he had only dyed his beard blue to mislead anyone from the true origins of his name.

But even then, what did the name Bluebird mean?

Well, that was impossible to know since that specific wife had disappeared shortly after marrying him. Like every other wife he married. Rumor had it that his wives fled away from his obsessive behavior toward them. Others claimed the wives had been killed. One after the other. Buried back in the garden of his castle. They said he called his wives birds. He loved to bury the birds in the garden, the one in the back of his mansion or castle or whatever that intimidating and huge structure on top of the mountain was called.

They said he loved to call his wives birds. And when they died, they turned blue. So he buried his bluebirds in the garden in the back, where each wedding took place, where kings and queens of the world attended all kinds of celebratory balls.

The garden, which he had aptly called The Bluebeard Garden – or did he mean The Bluebird Garden? No one was sure. But later, when I gave in and married him, I saw the invitation cards for the wedding. They said ‘You're invited to witness the honorable marriage of Prince Bluebeard and Princess Erza in the Bluebeard Garden.’

I must have misjudged him. The peasants’ rumors had messed with my mind. Bluebeard was only a tortured man with too many secrets. A man who longed for a good wife, while none of those he had married before understood him. Or did I just fool myself then?

Let us not speculate on the conclusions. For if you think stories are marked by their endings, you are absolutely wrong. This diary is all about the journey. How things came to be. It's about the tiniest of details. If the devil has ever fooled you by convincing you he was someone else, then it's because you've never paid attention to details.



So, at the age of fifteen, I ran away from my aristocratic family. It had been a common custom for girls to get married at that age then. If you're reading this diary in more modern times, then you'd probably be calling my era either the 16th or 17th century, I am not sure exactly which.

To disappear I had to run to the forest. I had no place else to go, or they would find me. It troubled me why my family didn't fight for me, handing me over into the arms of a possible serial murderer of women – historically, the world's first serial killer, if you know what that means. I knew Bluebeard was feared, that either parents gave him their daughters out of intimidation or being the gold diggers most people were.

Bluebeard was rich beyond imagination. He had managed to build his castle at the top of the mountain in six days. The man possessed some kind of unholy magic.

But I still wished my parents had fought for me. Then again, I knew why they didn't. My father had never wanted a daughter, my mother believed I was wicked like my father. An enchanting family.

The days and nights I spent in the forest surprised me. I had assumed I could never relate to the greens, the darkness and the animals, but somehow I felt at home. I felt safer with everything that wasn't human. I felt the kindness of the darkness and the stray animals in the strangest ways.

Every now and then, I'd hide on top of a dense tree, watching the town's hound dogs looking for me. I was surprised, listening to the searchers. They weren't the least worried about me. They feared Bluebeard's wrath in case they never found me.

For three weeks I hid, never being seen let alone caught, and I was beginning to plan the rest of my life living in the forest.

If only Bluebeard's castle on top of the mountain hadn't caught my eye one day.

I spent hours staring at it, unable to fathom its structure. Was it round? Square? Oblong? I could never tell. It struck me that it was like a chameleon, changing colors each time I looked away and back. Sometimes, it seemed to look back at me. So immense was the feeling that I unconsciously took a step back.

This wasn't just a castle. It struck me like a beast. A dragon. Sleeping. For centuries. Ready to wake up and spit fire and burn whatever surrounded it.

What kind of castle was this?

My fifteen-year-old curiosity pulled me closer to it. Instead of taking more steps back, I advanced, climbing up the hill, wondering if I could spot the garden in the back. If I made it that far, could I dig out the wives he had supposedly killed?

Closer.

Out of breath.

Hypnotized by a greater power.

On my way up to the top of the mountain, I saw a sign. It was made of oak wood and had been left flat on its front amidst the devil's grass. The moon above seemed fond of the battered sign, blessing it with its singular beam of white in the middle of the night. There I saw carvings on the wooden sign, but clearly someone had knocked it down for some reason. Maybe it had become useless, giving directions to a place that wasn't there anymore.

Or maybe someone preferred a certain place never be found.

I tipped the sign over, curious to read it, to know of the direction it led to.

The answer was stranger than I had expected. The sign said: East of the Sun, West of the Moon.

Really? Well, thank you that really helped.

"West of the moon, I can understand," I mumbled mockingly. "But how am I supposed to find east of the sun in the middle of the night."

I left it flat on the ground and continued my climb.

A day later, I arrived at the castle. Not just that. I realized I'd already entered the garden.

My steps became slower and I almost wanted to tiptoe, in case I was stepping over the dead.

But unlike what I had in mind, the garden was enchantingly beautiful. There were almost no trees. Only roses and flowers in bundles that seemed to imitate the colors of a rainbow. Some of the flowers were unbelievably huge. They bent over my head, sheltering me and creating some kind of

shade. They smelled like a romantic fantasy. Scents I had never known existed. A pleasant feeling surged through my body, as if I were about to grow wings and levitate above the ground.

It was impossible to think of this as a grave. Would flowers so beautiful dare to grow in such an evil place? Something didn't make sense.

I crossed through the tunnel of flowers and was exposed to the vaster regions of the garden. Too big to take in from a few glances. But it was the colors of light pooling down that caught my attention. Where did that magnificent light come from?

I raised my head and saw something I had never seen before. Something that most people never see in a lifetime. Something that would later confuse a lot of people about the identities of the Lost Seven—don't ask, that’s one hell of a long story.

When I glanced upward I saw Bluebeard's garden had its own moons. Yes, moons not moon. Each moon was fixed in position lighting a different part of the garden. Different colors. Purple, white, and yellow. The moons never moved. Like lanterns dangling from invisible hooks in the sky.

"I'd get one of those moons and place it at your feet," a voice came from behind.

Though intimate and soothing, I was so scared that I couldn't move my feet. Eventually, I turned and faced the voice.

It was Bluebeard.



It wasn't the first time I'd seen him. He had been present in the town many times. All the girls, though fearing him, were curious. Devil or not, he was strikingly handsome. Looking fit and youthful for a forty-year-old. I even began doubting his spoken age. Maybe he just wanted to scare everyone by pretending to be older.

And wait. What did he just say about placing one of these beautiful moons at my feet?

"If you want two, I can go get two of them," he said, waving up at the light in the sky. "I assume purple is your favorite." That was true. "White your second favorite." That was true, too.

"Is that the price you'd pay to shut my mouth?" I clamp my hands at my waist, not sure if I was overreacting or sounding childish. I was fifteen for god's sake.

He said nothing and raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"All the poor girls you buried in this garden." I stomped a foot upon what I believed was a grave.

He tilted his head toward the imaginary grave. "Someone is buried underneath your feet?"

I didn't want to answer. He made it sound so comical and I didn't want to laugh.

"I'd pull that foot back if I were you," he whispered, his voice low as if some conspiracy was happening between us. "You don't want to wake them up."

I swallowed my barking laugh all the way down my intestines. He wasn't going to charm me into acting the fool. "How did you kill them?" I insisted.

He leaned back, enamored not offended. Even at fifteen I could understand and clearly see what an enchanted man looked like. It was deviously beautiful that the things I said amused him.

"I choked her." He made a serious face.

"All of them?" I really wasn't sure if we were bantering or being serious.

"Not at the same time, if that's what you mean. I only have two hands."

I cleared my throat. He was handsome but his hands were big. I could faint, imagining him using them to choke someone.

"The last girl had a thick neck," he continued. "I had no choice but slap her with a pan."

My eyes widened. He sounded really serious. I couldn't speak.

"But then, she had a thick skull," he said. "So I had to kick her in the stomach."

I was about to cry, staring at the grave beneath my feet.

"Still, she was tough. I needed a stronger weapon."

I made a fist with my hand, wondering if hitting him would pain me more than it'd hurt him. "What did you do, you evil beast?"

"The usual." He shook his shoulder and clapped his hands clean. "I shot her with a rifle. I mean, why do I always forget to use it. It's easier and faster. Why does killing my wife have to be so dramatic? One shot, a shovel, and solid and fertile ground in the garden does it."

I found myself running toward him. No plan. I wasn't even going to hurt him. Just needed to get this anger out of me and bump into him.

He laughed, and skillfully avoided me in a fast maneuver. I flew midair with my punch and landed in the mud behind him.

Clearing my eyes with my hands, I saw a smudged image of him laughing at me. Again, enamored, staring with two beautiful blue eyes as if nothing else existed in the world.

This time my cheeks turned red. Confused, I looked away, about to laugh, too, when he said, "Now clean up this mess you made as I prepare our dinner, my beloved new wife."



The other women before me hadn't been allowed to contact their families once married to him. The families had strangely approved, and a girl's marriage was the equivalent of becoming dead to her loved ones. In return, he'd promised the families a lavish life, which most of them accepted—including my father and mother.

But I hadn't succumbed to his proposal yet. Infatuated and mesmerized I may have been, but not foolish enough to marry him. I was curious about him more than anything else. How was the killer Bluebeard such a charming and light-hearted man?

"I'm not going to marry you," I told him across the long dinner table. He sat far away on the other side, separated by the endless food and drinks and golden chandeliers.

"Did you say something?" He looked up from his soup.

"You heard me. I'm not going to marry you."

"But of course." He sipped his drink elegantly. "Because if you marry me, I will have to kill you and bury you next to the other blue birds in the garden." He winked.

"You're not funny." I squinted at him, still swallowing all the smiles.

"Didn't mean to be," he said. "I was trying to scare you, but you seem like a brave girl."

The conversation was unlike what I had expected. I needed answers. I needed to uncover the personality he masked with his charms. "Why me?"

"Why you?" He put the spoon down, interested.

"Why do you want to marry me?"

He considered, seeming to be impressed. "None of the other girls ever asked me this." He rubbed his chin. "I assumed they were all in it for the money and wealth."

"Or they feared you would hurt their families if they hadn't agreed."

"I heard that too, but it's not true." He sipped the soup again.

"Why marry a lot of women then?"

"I never did. I only married when one wife escaped. Never more than one at a time."

"Why do they escape?"

"I think it's the soup. They all hated the soup."

"Stop it! I want real answers."

"I wish I knew, trust me," he said. "Maybe I scared them off somehow."

I didn't know how to respond to that. He seemed sincere, charming as usual, but I never believed him.

"So I am just a substitute wife."

"Actually no." He dropped the spoon, sounding serious. "I liked you the minute I entered this town."

"Liar."

"It's true. I wanted you as my wife, but they said you were too young, that I needed to wait for two more years."

"You think I am still a child, and you're playing with my mind."

"You want me prove that I like you?"

"Prove?" I grimaced.

"What if I show you a secret?" His eyes glimmered. "One that only I know?"

I nodded slowly, swallowing hard. I had a feeling he was going to show me the women he had killed.



Bluebeard took me by the hand, out of the castle and into the garden. My thoughts were reeling so strongly that I had trouble listening to his words.

"Are you with me, Erza?" he asked.

I shook my thoughts away and nodded.

"See those trees scattered all around the garden?"

I nodded again. Among the colorful flowers I saw many trees with thick roots going down into the earth. They seemed the only thing in the garden that didn't fascinate me. "What about them?"

"What if I told you their branches are special?"

"How so?"

"I'll show you," he said and began whistling.

At first, it seemed the whistling of a trained person who'd done it many times in the past. But slowly I began to listen to the beautiful tune, which he repeated with the breaths from his mouth, controlling its melodies by the twisting of his tongue. Bluebeard seemed to portray the manners of a child all of a sudden. His mastery of the whistled tune let him be free of whatever adulthood he'd been chained by.

I was about to laugh when he began tapping his feet on the grass. The tune increased in power and smoothly blocked every useless thought in my mind from rising. I was enchanted by the melody.

But I had to interrupt. "So?" I folded my arms. "You have childish tendencies and can play your tongue like you’re playing a flute."

He didn't answer me and continued whistling, pointing at the trees.

At first, I couldn't quite register the image in front of me. But there was no escaping from it. The trees were swaying to his melody, dancing like lovers in the garden, the many moons in the night sky veiled them with white magic.

"Come on." Bluebeard took my hand again and steered me to the nearest tree branch, a wide green carpet-like stretch of leaves and wood lowered itself and we stepped upon it.

Like some great bird's wings, it lifted off the ground. I struggled with my balance, but Bluebeard caught me in his arms. "Stay focused," he said. "You will need that once we start dancing."

"Dancing?" I said.

Bluebeard had stopped whistling, but his melodies still lingered in the air, like a strong scent of a beautiful presence.

The tree branches lifted us so high toward the moons that I stopped looking down. Then, out of nowhere they wriggled underneath our feet and nudged us into the air. I let out a scream while Bluebeard continued laughing like a child, as the branches flipped us backwards in midair.

"Hang tight," he chirped.

After a couple of flips in the air I was surprised when we landed onto another tree branch nearby. This one was cushiony and comfortable, like a rich man's bed. Again, I struggled with my balance, but I finally managed to gain some sense of equilibrium.

Bluebeard grabbed me close and began dancing to the melody in the air. "Don't step on my feet please," he joked. "I've always imagined you dancing with me."

I stepped on his right foot, on purpose. "Let me show you how dancing is done." I grinned, and he loved it.

And so we danced on each branch for some time, continuously being spat out to another. Before long all the branches had created a padded platform – midair – for us to dance throughout the night. The moons gathered and produced one spot of white to illuminate whichever area we tapped our feet upon.

Nothing would have changed a fifteen-year-old like me more than this. But I had to ask. "Are you a magician?"

And this was when Bluebeard had me. He said, "Only for you."



Whoever coined the term 'falling in love' must have been really in love, maybe for the first and last time in their life. Because looking back now, loving Bluebeard felt like a perpetual fall into something so beautiful. As if I had let go of everything, hands spread at my sides, welcoming my downfall into a bed of roses.

The days passed and I just kept falling.

We danced day and night, upon trees, human-sized flowers, and inside the halls of his castle where I saw a piano for the first time in my life. That black box, elegantly designed and curved, like a big chest of treasures holding onto many valuable secrets.

"Can you play it?" I asked.

"I can," he said. "But let me show you how."

Bluebeard took my hand, this time pressing on my forefinger and brushed it over the black and white keys stretching out before me.

"Don't press the keys yet," he whispered in my ears, standing right behind me, caressing me with that exotic scent of his beard. Some perfume I hadn't been able to connect with a definite smell, yet. Unearthly. "Feel them. Brush your finger upon each key, slowly."

I registered that he called those black and white wooden blocks, the size of fingers, keys. And indeed, it confirmed my impression of this incredible musical instrument. It kept its secrets inside, and the only way to unlock them was through the keys.

"The keys have names," he continued whispering. "This one is called Doe."

"Doe?" I pronounced it as I heard it. Later I realized he wrote it as 'do'.

"Do a deer, a female deer," he sang to me. "It's a song that no one knows about, but they will in a few centuries."

"You can read the future?"

"The second key is called Ray," he dismissed my inquiry and I couldn't resist his voice.

"Ray?" I said, later realizing that musicians wrote it as 're'.

"Like a brilliant musician from the future by the name Ray Charles," he whispered in my ears, his breath on my neck. I was too hypnotized to question him talking about unheard of names and the future.

"The third key is called Me." He guided my finger to it, this time helping me to push it down, producing a single note that almost took my breath away.

"Me?" I said. "Do you have a futuristic story for this one, too?"

"No," he said. "This one stands for Me and You."

Then he turned me around and pulled me closer. His eyes watched me as he caressed my lips with his finger for some time. I was about to swallow when he stopped me by gently kissing my lips.

Me and you. "Forever." I thought I heard him say.

As we danced and kissed all night, he told me about the musical keys of the piano: do, re, me, fa, so, la, ti. Only I hadn't realized that night how important these notes would be in the future. How could I? I was only fifteen, charmed by an older man who later turned my tears into diamonds. I was sad. He was a magician like those I'd imagined and read about in books. That was his secret and he kept it with me.

And so I kept falling in love with him. Falling so much, so fast that marrying him came naturally, like birds chirping in the sky.

After my parents had attended the wedding and taken whatever money they had asked from him, Bluebeard and I danced again. If I remember correctly, and even though we'd just been married, it was our last dance as beloved husband and wife.

Because from that moment on, the falling wasn't as fun as before.



A few months later Bluebeard surprised me with the news of his upcoming travels.

"Do you have to go?" I asked, wondering if I could stand this vast castle on my own.

"Don't worry the maids will keep you company," he said. "They will entertain and take care of you."

"But how long will you be gone?"

"I should back next full moon."

"And where will you go?"

"I have to visit an old friend," he hesitated. "But I am afraid I cannot tell you more."

"I understand." I didn't understand. I was just young and naive and helpless.

"Don't worry." He held me by the shoulders. "The castle is full of surprises. Explore it as much as you like." He shrugged. "All but one room."

I tilted my head quizzically.

"It’s the last room on the left on the ground floor," he explained. "The one with my huge portrait on its door."

I did want to ask. I should have asked. But he'd just pecked a kiss on my forehead and left abruptly, vanishing into the night, leaving me alone.

And so the days went by.

The boredom didn't attack me all at once. I did explore so many rooms in the castle, discovering exceptional art and entertainments and mysteries. But paradise is so dull if you're the only one who occupies it. I slowly realized how cozy and small homes make people happier. I mean all these rooms did nothing but make me wonder if evil lurked in one of them.

Then I spoiled myself with baths and food and having ten maids serving me. One of them had a peculiar name: Tabula Rasa. She was older and obedient. You'd think she is naive. But she wasn't. She knew things, but never exposed them. I made jokes about her being immortal, and she laughed heartily, saying she'd be surprised if she lived another ten years. She was lying; Tabula was immortal and had served so many queens and kings in the same castle, in other times and other places, but I digress.

Tabula showed me Bluebeard’s many bathtubs inside his castle. My husband had a lavish and seemingly unusual style. The bathtubs were large, some the shape of apples, others looked like hearts. I wondered why he'd never showed them to me.

"He hasn't used any since you arrived," she said. "Before that we were never allowed in here when he bathed inside."

I sensed she was lying to me. My curiosity piqued. "Does he come alone?"

She shrugged. I knew she was lying. "No. He always came with one of his wives."

And so she left me wondering why he'd never invited me here as well.

Tabula would not tell me more about the bathtubs for days. Even though I befriended her, she had her secrets under lock and key. Out of loyalty to Bluebeard, I supposed.

I had to test the waters and so asked her. “What about the room my husband told me not to open?”

Tabula’s eyes avoided mine. She pretended to continue knitting my new dress, while sitting by my feet as they dangled from the unusually high bed.

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about,” she claimed.

“Bluebeard told me not to open the last room on the left, the one with his portrait carved on the door.”

“The portrait?” Tabula raised her head, staring up at nothing in particular. “Is that a door?”

I had a hard time accepting she didn’t know, so I guided her to it, so we could both examine it.

We stood in front of the door, made of what looked like wood but was a hard as iron. I tested it, trying to knock, but I got no reply. My husband’s portrait filled two thirds of the span, no hinting of the slightest of splits in the mid-section. Since I hadn’t seen such a broad door before, I’d earlier assumed it was a double door, but maybe I was wrong.

“I don’t see how this can be a door?” Tabula scratched her temples.

“Me neither,” I mumbled.

Why did he tell me it’s a door then?

For a moment, I had to assess the situation. If my husband really killed girls as it had been rumored, why would he tell me about the locked room where he kept them?

Something didn’t seem right.

“You can go now, Tabula,” I said. “Thank you.”

I watched her disappear in the vast and endless corridors and turned to inspect the door.

For hours, days, and nights, I sat next to it, but with not enough clues to figure things out. I always ended up staring at Bluebeard's portrait. It reminded me of how handsome he was. The portrait slightly showed his age though, by adding a few flickers of silver hair to his temples. I hadn't seen those myself. Maybe he dyed his hair.

One other thing stood out each time I looked at the portrait.

His eyes.

Those weren't my husband's kind and caring eyes. Those had a maroon tint to them, a subtle wickedness, and manipulating endeavor.

I wondered who'd painted it.

Squinting at the details of the eyes and the face, I began to think my husband wasn't from where I lived in Eastern Europe. No, definitely not from here. How I hadn't noticed that when staring at him in the flesh, I had no idea. Maybe in real life we don't see people with our eyes, but hearts, thinking it's the eyes.

French, I thought. He could have descended from French nobility. It was hard to pinpoint why, but I remember how my girlfriends fancied the French soldiers who crossed our borders. I thought Bluebeard was like an older version of those.

Damn it, I thought. This emptiness and loneliness is going to drive me to lose my mind. I had to give up on the door and be a good wife and wait for my husband's return. Standing up, I was ready to leave, when I thought I heard something.

It came from behind the door.

Instantly, I asked if someone was there, but like always: no reply. So I leaned my shoulder against it and pressed my ear tight, listening.

The sound was faint — or weak. It seemed near, but barely audible. At times I'd thought I'd heard scratching at the door, but I couldn't be sure. I

knocked, scratched, and rapped on it myself, but it was all in vain. All I could do was listen to the sound and try to figure out what it was.

If it was one of his previous wives, then why didn't she answer me, I wondered. She could at least have returned my knocks.

I took a few steps back, assessing if the door was breakable, but it seemed like a towering fortress of stubbornness to me.

Back with my eyes pressed to the door, I swore I wouldn't leave before I figured it out.

"Answer me," I whispered, as if conspiring with whoever was on the other side. "I will not tell him. Just confirm you're there. I can help you."

No reply, even the sound disappeared.

"Don't do this to me," I said. "At least keep making that noise."

The faint whistle returned. This time I believed it wasn't human. Some kind of an animal? A really small one?

"Listen to me," I whispered again. "All I want to know is if there is a way to open the door."

No reply, but I insisted. "Please tell me, is there a way to open the door?"

The sound escalated—this or I was going mad.

"Great," I said. "Can you tell me how?"

"Door."

I almost shrieked, listening to the speaker on the other side. Was that the voice of a young girl? Oh my lord in heavens.

"What did you say?"

"Door."

"I know it's a door," I said. "Do you know how to open it?"

"Yes."

"How?"

“Door.”

“Are you having trouble speaking?”

No reply.

“Did someone hurt you?”

No reply.

“Can you tell me anything else but ‘yes’ and ‘door’?”

No reply.

I sank to my knees, weighted down with my frustration. “One last time. How can I open the door?”

“Door.”

Then it whistled again. This time I could clearly make out what I was talking to. If I hadn’t seen Bluebeard’s magic earlier, I’d have sworn I was hallucinating. But I wasn’t. I was talking to a bird behind the door.



I retired to the Bluebeard Garden to collect my thoughts. The door my husband denied me had a bird living on the other side. What kind of madness was that?

I walked among the flowers and swaying trees, thinking it over. A bird that can only say ‘yes’ and ‘door’. To be honest, it may have not said yes. I could have imagined that part. I wasn’t sure.

But it definitely said ‘door’.

“What is that supposed to mean?” I mumbled. “The only way to open a door is ‘door’?”

I tapped my feet, feeling dizzy and confused. After all, I’d tried to open the door anyway. Now, when my husband returned, I doubted he wouldn’t know. I’d started a fire and the only way to kill it was to open that door. Bluebeard was going to be mad anyway.

Then right there where I stood, something happened. I glimpsed a bird I'd never seen in the garden before. The same bird that would confirm that this garden had originally been called the Bluebird Garden.

I saw a bluebird fluttering over the swaying green trees. It was actually blue, and it was alive, not dead. I'd never seen anything like it. It was a big bird, the size of a parrot.

Oh my God, a parrot. Is that what was behind the door?

Aiming to wave at the bird, it surprised me by flying down my way. Not too low though. I craned my head up and smiled at it. Then its yellow eyes stared at me and it spoke to me before fluttering away again.

It said, "Door."



A few days later I was sitting in a gypsy's place on the outskirts of town. Against Bluebeard's wishes I'd left the castle and come here to see a woman who called herself the Godmother. A gypsy, old, blind, and of brown skin.

Tabula had guided me to her, saying she was the one woman to ask about such birds and the history of the castle.

"If anyone knows who Bluebeard really is, it'd be the Godmother," Tabula had said.

Godmother's small house was lit by too many candles. An empty cot lay in the middle, elevated on a few stones to be used as a table. The two chairs on either side were pumpkins. I had to bring myself to sit on mine, afraid it would squash underneath me, but it didn't.

"You're Erza?" Godmother asked.

I nodded, unable to raise my voice out of respect. The woman had an invisible aura to her.

"You'll have to do better than nod when a blind woman asks you something." She rolled her blind eyes.

“Ah, sorry,” I said. “But wait, how did you see that?”

“I didn’t.” she said. “People are predictable. I can see their actions coming a mile away. You’re young — I know from the scent of your skin. And you’re naive — I can tell from leaving Bluebeard’s house to search for his secret. You probably had a hard time sitting on the pumpkin, afraid it wouldn’t hold. And you’re intimidated by my brown skin, white and blind eyes, so you nodded and didn’t answer me.”

“You see a lot.”

“Pun intended?” She smiled.

“I’m sorry.” I lowered my head. “I don’t go out much.”

“Why go out when your castle is the size of our town?”

“It is,” I agreed. “But it’s scary.”

“You tried to open the door he told you not to open?” She cut right through.

“You know about the door? Did Tabula tell you?”

“I know because he asks this of all his wives,” she said. “It’s the last thing he asks them before they disappear forever.”

I resolved to remain sitting in silence.

“You see, Bluebeard will claim they all left, traveled away and left him lonely, but that isn’t the truth.”

“What is the truth then?”

“I’d be lying if I say I knew. All I know is that they haven’t left the castle.”

“How do you know?”

“Because you’re not the first one who’s been asked not to open the door, tries to open it, finds the Bluebird, and comes asking how to open the door.”

I took a deep breath. I’ve started a fire, and it’s going to be really hard to put it out.

“Are you saying Bluebeard will do whatever he did to them to me when he comes back?”

“I believe so,” she said. “I think he is tricking you, asking you not to open a door, when he knows you will.”

“Or maybe he is looking for an obedient wife who can keep secrets," I said, feeling guilty. I mean he showed me his magic secret about the whistling and the trees. He seemed eager to know I can keep all of his secrets, so he asked me not to open the door. Maybe it’s me who is a horrible wife.

“Wives believe what they want to believe about their husbands,” she commented. “Did the bird tell you how to open the door?”

“It only uttered one word, over and over.”

“‘Door’ I know. None of the previous wives succeeded in solving the puzzle.”

“Why would the bird tell me a puzzle?”

“Probably because it’s loyal to Bluebeard. Don't think the bird is on your side. I believe he created it to entice you to open the door, to want to.”

“Why?”

“We’ve never understood why?”

“Did you ever know the reason behind the multiple marriages?”

Godmother took a moment to think. “I have my theory.”

“Would you please enlighten me?”

“It’s just a theory.”

“I’m willing to listen, since there are no sound explanations. I’d like to know why he chose me.”

“Well, he chose you because you’re like them,” she said nonchalantly. “What it is you and the previous wives have in common, I don’t know.”

“Then back to your theory. Were all the wives as young as me?”

“Not at all. Different ages. And they weren’t all as beautiful as you.”

“Maybe they were all poor like me, easy to marry once their parents’ greed had been taken care of.”

“Not even that. Some were rich.”

“Maybe they all had to be from this town? This must be it; he needs to marry girls from this town for some reason.”

“Darling,” Godmother leaned forward, staring at me, and not staring at me. “You’re really naive.”

“What do you mean?”

“Where do you think your husband traveled to?”

“To see a friend?”

She laughed.

“You mean he lied to me. You mean he is…”

“Married to other women all over Europe, darling,” she said. “You’re not special.”

A tear threatened to trickle down my cheek. “But he loves me.”

“You mean he charmed you; with the garden, with the magic. Did he tell you he’d never told anyone else about his whistling and the swaying of the trees?”

It was a hard task to keep that tear inside.

“I suppose he played the piano for you. Did he teach you the musical keys? Do, re, me, fa, so, la, ti?”

There was no point to keeping the tear inside. It was stinging like a deceptive bee already.

“Don’t think I care for your tears,” she said. “I’m fed up with seeing naive girls like you falling for him.”

I fell too deep in love. So deep, I ended up buried six feet under.

“What should I do now?” I asked.

“First, you have to know of your husband’s ancestors.”

“Why?”

“It’ll give you an idea of what kind of man he is.”

“Who are they?”

“Not they. Him. Bluebeard is a descendant of Gilles de Rais.”

“Who is that?”

“A Frenchman, a knight and lord from Brittany.”

“I suspected he was French. The portrait.”

“Gilles de Rais lead the French army, along with the infamous Joan of Arc in the fifteenth century.”

“So he was a noble fighter.”

“No he wasn’t,” she said. “He was convicted of killing masses of children and women.”

I leant away from her, shocked by the announcement.

“You know what kind of women he killed the most?”

“What kind?”

“His wives.”



Back from visiting Godmother, I waited in front of the door again, wondering if I could open it. Things had changed dramatically from the last time I stood here. Right now, if I failed to open the door and expose him, he’d probably kill me and bury me in the Bluebird Garden.

I had no one to run to. Bluebeard had bought the town’s loyalty with his money, including my parents. It occurred to me how greedy my parents

were. I mean, I came from a noble house. I told Godmother we were poor, but we weren't really. I assumed she knew it, too. The poverty was metaphorical to my family's intricate and complicated situation.

You see, my family actually used to rule this region of Europe, but due to a vicious uprising, backed up by the swords of our enemies, things were confusing. If we eventually won the war, then we'd return to being the masters of the land. If not, my family would be killed and I would be poor for real.

Bluebeard never cared for the war in our region, living an invincible life in the castle up the hill. But he approached me believing that my family would lose the war, which was likely, thus the assumption of my poverty.

I snapped out of my internal memories and attempted to talk to the bird behind the door again…

Each time I tried to talk it into telling me how to open the door, it returned the same nonsense, saying 'door'! This time I registered the way the bird pronounced it. Doooorrrr. Interpreting a meaning behind the awkward spelling proved futile.

It's a bird, Erza, for God's sake. It shouldn't be talking, let alone pronouncing efficiently.

I resorted to inspecting every inch of the door and the portrait. I was looking for hidden clues or anything unusual, anything that'd suggest how to open up this stubborn door. But I could not find anything.

One night, I fell asleep next to it. When I awoke I thought I heard something else behind the door. Some kind of wailing or humming. A voice? A woman? No, a younger girl? I was too tired, and I could have been dreaming, so I went back to sleep.

When I woke up again, I was staring at Bluebeard's boots standing next to me.



"I thought I had warned you not to open this room." His voice was gloomy and raw, his boots spattered in mud and looked as if raindrops had been spluttering onto them.

When I raised my head, I saw his beard was still blue, and his eyes reminded me of the mischievous eyes in the portrait.

"But I haven't," I said, mustering the courage to pretend I didn't. "I was just enchanted by your portrait and spent the nights sleeping beside it, so it would remind me of you."

A long silence swept over the hallway. I prayed the maids would back me up and not tell him about me trying to open the door or leaving the house without his permission.

"Are you not curious about what lay behind the door?" he asked.

"Curious yes, but obedient, too." I was dying to know how the door opened but said nothing.

"Let me show you," he said with a smile slowly forming on his lips. “I only ask you to close your eyes and clamp your hands on your ears while I do it.”

And before I knew it, his hands clamped down on my ears and I shut my eyes.



Whatever he did to open the door, I missed seeing. Frankly, when I opened my eyes and regained my hearing, I was too overwhelmed to ask how because I was standing inside with Bluebeard beside me.

As for the room, it was small, almost empty, except for something veiled in white, crumpled sheets, at the end of it, on the wall before me. It seemed like something as tall as any human. Oval with a thick frame.

I watched Bluebeard pull the veil back, uncovering what was underneath.

Like a lightning strike, I was attacked by a bright gleam of silver and white. I shielded my eyes and took a deep breath. The light was warm I

could feel it on the back of my hand. I waited for it to subside, then looked back again, curious.

It took a moment for my eyes to sees through the blur. The oval thing had a golden frame to it. Expensive gold, I assumed, like I had never seen before. But it wasn't the frame that shocked me and forced me to take a step back. There was something else inside the frame.

Me.

"Who is this?" I pointed with anger, asking Bluebeard.

Before he could open his mouth, I noticed the woman who looked exactly like me, pointed the same finger in my direction. I felt as if possessed, wriggling and trying to avoid her, but whatever move I made, she imitated me.

"Relax," Bluebeard said. "It's called a mirror."

Though old men by the fire had told us stories about something called 'mirrors' when we were children, it didn't register right away. It wasn't like I hadn't seen my reflection before. In the lake and in shiny objects. I had been groomed for my wedding staring at one of these things.

But it had never been this clear. Never this real.

I'd have sworn there was another woman, looking like me, and standing before me.

"Magic, too?" I asked.

"Not mine for sure," he said. "I found it in this room when I bought the castle."

"Here?"

"Trust me, it scared me too, the first time I saw it."

"I think you should smash it," I said. "This can only be a work of evil."

"Reflecting your beauty, and letting you admire it, is hardly a work of evil," he argued. "You're just not used to it. You have no idea how addictive it can be."

“Addictive?”

“Every single one of my previous wives lusted after this mirror in ways you can’t imagine.”

“Lust?”

“My first wife suggested we had to bring it to the bedroom, and not tell anyone about it,” he said. “It was only days before she would not leave its sight. She was obsessed with her looks. She just couldn't stop staring.”

Carefully, I approached the mirror, trying to get used to my reflection. It wasn’t an easy task. There were things about me, my body, and my looks, that I didn’t like. Things I realized I’d imagined about me that were not true in the mirror. I discovered I wasn’t as beautiful as I imagined, for instance. I was certainly more rounded than I liked to be.

But I shook the thoughts away. Why would I trust an evil thing made out of magic? It can’t be right.

“What happened then?” I asked, almost absently, mesmerized by the mirror. My size actually changed when I neared it. And wait, my left side rather looked like my right. It didn’t make sense. “What happened after your previous wife was obsessed with it?”

“The same thing that is happening to you right now,” he said.

His words attacked my senses. I snapped out of the mirror’s influence and stared back at him.

“See how it’s slowly infatuating you?” he said, his voice tinge with accusation, desperation, disappointment. “You’re just like them.”

“Is that why you didn’t want me to unlock the room?”

He nodded, walking toward the door.

“Wait,” I longed for him. “I’m not going to be like them. I don’t care about my looks.”

“They all said so, too,” he said, not turning back to face me. “Soon this mirror will possess you. You will even claim it’s talking to you. You will only see the world through it. And it will mislead you, mess with your

mind, and then…" He turned to face me, moist-eyed. "And then you will leave me like the others."

"Is that what happened?"

"Only with the first two," he said. "But then I realized that I had to put every woman to the test, so I know who she really is, if she really loves me, and not the way my expensive jewelry looked on her neck when she stared at her reflection in a mirror. I had to put them all to the test."

My heart dropped to the floor. For a moment I misheard: I had to put them to rest.

"Test?" I blinked, wishing I had heard right.

"I pretended I was leaving while staying in the basement, asking them not to open the room. I gave them more than they could have asked for and only asked one thing in return: not to open the room."

"Bluebeard." I held him tight. "I am sorry. But I'm not like them. I don't care about the mirror. You can smash it if you want."

"I can't. I tried, but every time I return it's alive again."

"I don't care, I love you." I held his face in my hands. "Just keep this room locked forever."

"Do you mean that?"

"I love you. I do."

And then we kissed with the same passion as the day he'd taught me the musical notes. We ended up making love in this room. I didn't really want to. The room scared me, but I felt it meant a lot to him, to seize that moment and bond as husband and wife. I had to prove I loved him and that I didn't care about the mirror.

Ah, the mirror. That creepy thing that witnessed our love making that day. I'd even dropped the white veil upon it, but could still feel its hidden eyes piercing through.



For another month Bluebeard and I bonded again. He brought me breakfast in bed and washed my feet in his huge bathtub — which he finally permitted me to enter. We showered together in the bath which was shaped like an apple, then the one that looked like a heart. But he preferred a conical one that looked like a flute. It had several grooves like a flute's holes, only the size of a bathtub each. The holes spewed water at different temperatures. Some of them steamed and some of them were cold as ice, not to mention the scents they fumed. Strawberries, bananas, and an unusual mix of milk and chocolate, the one that annoyed me the most.

But my favorite bathtub was the weirdest. One that had been shaped after... well...

"I love this one," I said. "What's it shaped after?"

"You can't tell?" Bluebeard put down his glass of the most expensive liquor, one he'd said was imported from a place I had never heard of before: Transylvania.

"I have an idea but it's crazy. I am not sure this is the shape of the bathtub," I said.

"Then tell me." His eyes were curious, his immense frame caressing me.

"It looks like a liver." I laughed.

"You're right about that."

"Why a liver?"

"I have no idea."

"Don't tell me the castle came prepared with that as well."

"It did."

"Whom did you buy this castle from?"

"I didn't buy it." He laughed uncomfortably.

"What do you mean?"

"Would you believe me if I told you the castle bought me?"

"Don't be silly." I tapped his chest and lay my head on it.

"It's the truth. At some point in my life I kept dreaming about it."

"Of this castle?"

"Recurring dreams. Unmistakable and eerily accurate. I dreamt of a library inside the castle, one that seemed to hold a genuine secret."

"What kind of secret?"

"Promise me you will not laugh."

"I can't do that," I said. "What if you say something funny?"

Bluebeard sighed with a chuckle. "The secret of the world."

I had to laugh, glad I didn't promise him anything. “That's absurd. Did it say that in your dreams?"

"Aha.” he sipped from his drink, his lips stained with red wine now.

"What does that even mean 'the secret of the world'?"

"All unanswered questions: Why we are here? Who created us? What happens to us when we die? How are children really born? Whose religion is the true one? If there is a reason to why we fight our wars?" This part reminded me of the war my family was fighting; most of Europe was in turmoil, all the way from Styria to Hungary.

"I don’t like questions like these."

"Why?" He gently rubbed my arm.

"I don't know if you know this, but I was a troubled child."

"Really? You don't look like one."

"I used to hurt small animals and do terrible things. I guess I was compensating for my father's continued absence."

"I'm sorry." he kissed my head. "You will never feel that way with me."

I lifted my head and stared into his eyes. "Promise me?"

"I promise you that with me you will become a woman like no other in the world."

I didn't know what that meant, and it wasn't the reassuring answer I'd aimed for, but I settled for it. Sometimes wives can only settle for the lesser answers, as long as no harm is done—in my case it was as long as he wasn't going to kill me, because even with all his charm, I still couldn't quite believe him. I wish I could meet one of his previous wives and ask her what happened.

I lay my head back on his chest, wishing I could depend on its warmth for as long as I wanted it. "So you just found the castle after you dreamt of it?"

"No, I was obsessed with it and had to search for it."

"How so?"

"That's a long story. I found it in a place called the Between."

I wish I hadn't crossed into the warmth of his heart at this moment, so I could have heard more about the Between. But I slept in my husband's arms, inside my favorite liver bathtub, with that incredible milk and chocolate drink.



When I woke up I was alone. My stomach hurt so much and I jumped naked out of the bath and puked my way to the hall until the maids heard me and came to help. Bluebeard wasn't there, but they took care of me and sent me to my room.

"You're pregnant," said one of the maids.

I sat in my bed, dizzy and sick, hardly remembering what happened. I had not registered what the maid had just told me.

"Where is Tabula?" I asked.

"She accompanied Master Bluebeard on his travels."

"Travels, again?" I said, not sure if this was another trick. But if it was, why travel with Tabula along? And why would he want to trick me again? "Did he know that I'm pregnant?"

"No," a maid said. "He traveled before you fainted. He said you were asleep so he left you a note to apologize. He will be back in a week."

Again, I realized the fact hadn't sunk in yet. What was I supposed to feel knowing I was pregnant and all alone? Why didn't I feel happy?

"He doesn't know," the maid said. I noticed she was young and good looking. She didn't strike me as a maid but of noble descent. I didn't think I'd seen her before.

"And it's better that way," she said.

"What did you just say?" I snapped.

She leaned forward. Behind her, the other maids watched me with sympathetic eyes. "Listen," she almost whispered. "You're in great danger. We couldn't tell you this before, not with Tabula in the house."

"What are you talking about?"

"She is only loyal to Bluebeard. Everything she told you or showed you had been previously planned with him. It's a process."

"Process of what?"

"We're not sure, but if you don't escape you will disappear like the others."

"You mean the wives? You know what happened to his wives?"

"They are probably dead by now, but no one knows."

"Who are you?" I propped myself up in bed, my eyes suspicious of everyone around me.

"My name is Alice Grimm, but that doesn't mean anything to you," the young maid said. "I'm here to help you."

“By telling me all of this nonsense without proof?”

“We should have warned you earlier,” she sighed. “I assume that by now he’s charmed you with all this sweet talk, the garden, the music, and the magical baths.”

I said nothing. Part of me believed her. Part of me didn’t know what to believe.

“Each of his wives disappeared a few days after he made sure they were pregnant,” Alice said. “We’d heard him tell Tabula that you were special, that you were unlike the others, and that he didn’t want you to get pregnant.”

“If I was special, then why wouldn’t he want my children?” I waved a hand. Now these maids appeared to have proved to be talking nonsense. I thought I had them. I thought I’d persuaded myself that Bluebeard loved me. That I was a fifteen-year-old Hungarian girl that was special.

Alice Grimm leaned away from me, exchanging looks with the maid.

“What?” I said. “What is going on?”

“To answer you, I need to tell you something about Bluebeard that will upset you dearly.”

“What would upset me more than the fact that you’re suggested that he may kill me after getting pregnant?”

“The fact that he didn’t get you pregnant,” Alice said bluntly.

“What?” I grimaced.

“Bluebeard can’t have children.”

“Then how did he impregnate his previous wives?”

“We don’t know,” Alice said. “He is a terribly dark man. But what we do know is that he has a process, that he goes through, with his wives: he asks them not to open the door, and if they do he pretends he’s not been offended and then gets them pregnant and then…”

I didn’t need her to finish her sentence. I was fed up with speculations and ominous suggestions. I needed facts. “So you’re telling me none of his wives ever left him?”

“It’s impossible that they could have escaped.”

“Why so sure?”

“The bluebirds won’t let you. They will pick your eyes out before you leave.”

“But I left to see the Godmother.”

“That’s because he wanted you to. Every other wife had been sent to the Godmother, upon a suggestion from Tabula of course, who is only loyal to him.”

“So it’s all just a test?” My mouth was left open and my jaw hurt.

“And every wife fails it every time.”

“Why? What is the purpose of all that?”

“We’re not sure, but we know one thing,” Alice said.

I raised my head, staring right into hers. She’d better tell me something useful. “What’s that?”

“You’re special to him?”

“Stop saying that.”

“Trust me.” Alice neared me again. “He not only told Tabula you were special, but…”

“But what?”

“The last.”

“Last wife?”

Alice nodded.

“Why?”

“Somehow, you’re the one that completed his mission, prophecy, madness, whatever it is he is doing.”

I cleared my throat, wondering why a fifteen-year-old girl would be the last of Bluebeard’s wives, a man who had descended from a serial killer, who had descended from men who loved to kill their wives. Why would he stop at me?

“There is one other thing,” Alice sounded reluctant.

“What is it?”

“I will tell you but I ask you not to tell me how I know.”

I had to think it over for a minute. At the time I hadn’t known that Alice was Charmwill Glimmer’s granddaughter, sent between times and worlds to help and warn those who were pulled into the Piper’s war. But that’s a longer story I’ll leave to Alice to explain one day. What mattered to me is what she told me. It surely turned the tables on everything.

“Bluebeard is probably a tenth or fifteenth generation descendant of an evil man called the Piper, if not he is the Piper himself,” Alice explained.

“So?”

“To make the story short. The Piper is immortal. His one mission in life is find a certain song or flute that he thinks will let him rule all worlds. But he has a weakness.”

“Which is?”

“The Piper can’t rest before he gets his revenge on the seven families that escaped his wrath many, many centuries ago.”

“You’re not talking about the tale of the Pied Piper of Hamelin,” I snorted. “It’s a myth.”

“It’s not. It’s true. A forever war,” Alice insisted. “What matters is that the Piper has devoted his life to finding the descendants of the seven families and killing them at any price. It’s a necessity to him that they’re off the face of the world.”

“Even so, if Bluebeard works for the Piper, what does it have to do with me and the wives he has killed?”

The maids eyed me. Alice too. It was as if they wanted me to work it out for myself, without them telling me. It wasn’t hard to figure out. It answered the one question the Godmother herself failed.

How had Bluebeard chosen his wives?

I felt a knot in my heart when it came to me. I had to spell it out. Watch the maid’s eyes to see if I was right. I had to taste the answer on my tongue, though I knew it’d be bitter like most realities.

“The wives had all been descendants of those seven families,” I spelled it out, staring at Alice.

“We call them the Lost Seven,” Alice said. “But the right answer is: possible descendants. It seems like Bluebeard couldn’t tell, which makes sense, since he’s been tracking the families for centuries. They now have huge families with branches everywhere.”

“That’s some ruthless man who’d want to kill so many people.”

“Can you imagine the devotion? Can you imagine how many people he would have to kill? Women are his favorite of the Lost Seven.”

“Why?”

“They give birth,” Alice said. “There is a prophecy about a descendant of the Lost Seven bringing an end to the Piper’s reign. The strongest will be the women.”

“Then why all the games?”

“Again, we’re not sure, but maybe the door is a test of will. All Lost Seven descendants are curious women and have never been bound by a man’s obedience.”

“But you’re not sure.”

“I’m not.”

“And the pregnancy?”

“I’ve been told that he could recognize a Lost Seven descendant from her scent after getting pregnant, but it could be a myth.”

“So you’re not sure about that either?”

“No,” Alice said.

“We think he wants the make the revenge brutal,” another maid suggested. “We think he wants to kill you while pregnant so he can quench his centuries-long search for revenge.”

“I wouldn’t dismiss the idea,” Alice commented.

“So I’m destined for the same fate as the other women?” I spoke, but was mostly talking to myself. “Now that I can’t escape my castle and have a child, have fallen for his charms, and that I am descendant of the Lost Seven?”

“We’re not really sure you are,” Alice said. “None of the women were sure they were Lost Seven descendants. What we’re sure of is that you’re different. That’s why you’re last.”

“Maybe Bluebeard knows that I am the last of the Lost Seven?”

“This can’t be. The Lost Seven families were scattered all over the world. They wouldn’t happen to all live in a small town in Hungary.”

“Maybe he moves from town to town, until he can kill them all.”

“It’s possible,” Alice sighed. “It’s also possible that he only needs to kill a certain generation, since he’s rarely killed the fathers and mothers and sisters and brothers of the wives — sometimes he did, though. There is no point in dwelling on it. We need to find a way for you to…”

“Survive?” I let out a painful laugh. “Forget it. I’m just a fifteen-year-old naive girl with a troubled childhood.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Alice said. “I mean we need to find out if you can help these women?”

Her words slapped me on the face. “Are you saying they’re alive?”

“They might be.”

“Now you’re confusing me.”

“We are all confused. However, I do know something, a last resort, that if solved will unveil a lot of secrets.”

“What is it then? Tell me.”

“One of the maids overheard Bluebeard telling Tabula he has his wives trapped behind a door,” Alice said. “He never mentioned whether they were alive or dead, but he’s got them locked behind a door.”

“The only door that he’s kept secret is the one with the mirror,” I countered.

“We know, but that’s what the maid heard.”

“Did you hear anything useful then?”

Alice shrugged. “Well, she did. I don’t know how useful it is though, since you’ve heard before.”

“Spit it out.”

“The maid said Bluebeard told Tabula the door opened with a secret password.”

“At least we have a password.”

“It’s not that helpful, actually. Because the password is a word you’ve heard before.”

“Did I?”

“Of course,” Alice said. “It’s ‘door’.”



The key is door!

I spent the next three days trying to solve the puzzle. After detailed investigations, Alice told me that the maid heard Bluebeard tell Tabula, “The Key is Door.”

I argued with her several times that he may have said, “The Key is the Door.” But the maid countered and insisted on what she’d told me. Just like the Bluebird kept telling me in that weak accent. The maids also insisted that Bluebeard always referred to a ‘password’ as ‘key’. It rang true, remembering the times he mentioned, “The key to my heart” and “if I can only know the key to your mind, Erza.”

But how would it be ‘door’? It seemed naive to make the key to a door be ‘door’. Never would Bluebeard settle for such a password. There had to be something missing.

“At least we could focus on which door he meant,” Alice suggested.

“It’s the one with his portrait on it,” I said. “There is no question about it.”

“But you’ve been to that room. You only found a mirror.”

“There could be some kind of magic. Maybe things appear only after the right word is spoken. Maybe there are secret doors in the narrow walls around the mirror.”

“Then we should try saying the word ‘door’ in front of the portrait.”

“I did already, nothing happened,” I lamented. “I whispered. I yelled. I said it softly. I’ve even imitated the way the bird said it.”

“How did the bird pronounce it?”

“Doooorrrrr.”

“Like a creepy old witch?” Alice laughed.

“Not quite,” I said. “I mean when I think of it, the bird said it as if it were spelled… well… I can’t put my hands on it.”

“I have an idea,” a maid offered. “My mother is into black magic, and some of the spells need a certain word repeated over and over again for a certain period.”

“That’s not what Bluebeard did,” I said. “I remember he clamped my ears and eyes for only moments. It wasn’t long.”

“Other spells need the power of the voice,” the maid offered. “My mother had to attend rituals were tens of women called for a spirit in unison at once.”

“You think Bluebeard yelled the word and I didn't hear him?” I said.

“He is good with music,” Alice said. “I heard him sing before. He has a strong voice. We could try.”

“How do we do that?”

“The other maids will gather and shout the word,” the maid said. “We could try variants. Scream, yell, hum, maybe chant it musically like in the church.”

I said nothing. There was little I could object to. If it worked, it worked. If it didn’t, then we’d have crossed off a possibility.

The maids gathered in front of the mysterious room. Alice lined them up, row after row, like in a church. There were about fifteen of them. They could surely make a loud noise.

Then I saw a maid pull a wooden board out and lift it up toward the rest. I didn’t see what was written on it, though.

“It has the word ‘door’ written on it, in big English letters,” the maid explained. “My mother always said the power of the written word and the spoken can double the effect of a spell.”

“All right,” I said then a thought came to me.

Why did the bird say door in English? I mean it wasn’t the spoken language where I lived. Neither was it the language Bluebeard and I, or even Alice spoke. I’d learned English in my father’s library when we still ruled the region. I was privileged. Why didn’t the bird speak in my Eastern European language?

Was it possible that door was a word with a different meaning in another language? It wasn’t in mine. Those four letters didn’t make any sense to me.

Another language? How would I know for sure?

It was just a thought. One I couldn't think about for long. I was four days away from Bluebeard's return.

But wait. Did the maid speak English? I asked.

"They read the letters," Alice said. "The same like your language, but they don't read or speak English. They only know how to pronounce 'door' and know what it means because of the repeated incidents.

It took me a moment to think about this. Something told me the solution to the keyword was right before my eyes. I just couldn't put a finger on it.

"Could you turn around, please?" I asked the maid

She did, still holding the wooden plate with her two hands up high.

"You've spelled the word wrong," Alice told the maid. "It's 'door' not 'dore.'"

"Very sorry," the maid lowered her head, attempting to go and rewrite it on another plate.

"Wait," I waved a hand. "No need. It's a different spelling, yes, but the outcome is the same. It will not make a difference with what the maid will hum."

"But the power of the word like my mother said," the maid began, but I stopped her.

"I know about the power of the written word, and that it better be spelled right. But we're all missing the point here. The word door still sounds the same with different spellings."

"What are you suggesting?" asked Alice.

I tilted my head, thinking. In truth, I didn't know what I was suggesting, except that, "The key to opening this room sounds like 'door' but it's not necessarily the word itself."

"Another meaning?" Alice wondered. "You mean in another language?"

"I don't know many languages, but I'm thinking this is why we don't get it. The word sounds like 'door' but isn't."

“It would explain why Bluebeard is using it. A word that is so easy and makes no sense that its true meaning would be overlooked.”

“But what does it mean?”

“My mother used to talk about magical languages and runes,” the maid went on again. “Words and vowels that don’t make sense to us.”

“But this one makes sense,” I said, thinking. “We just don’t know what it really means. Is it ‘dore’ or ‘door’ or something else?”



Four days later, and only hours before Bluebeard’s expected arrival, I still hadn’t solved the puzzle. I did attempt an escape through the forest, but the maids were right. The forest played tricks on me. Every direction I slithered through, I ended up at the same spot where I started. How did I know? I always ended by the sign that said West of the Moon, East of the Sun.

Sometimes it said West of the Sun, East of the Moon. I didn’t pay attention to that part. For all I knew the forest was mocking me; did it really matter whether it was west or east of the moon? It was an unapproachable place either way.

Back in the hallway, I sat with my hands on my chin, staring at the door, thinking about the mirror behind it. I could swear the answer was in that mirror. If I could only solve the ‘dore’ puzzle.

“He’s here,” one of the maids told me. “Master Bluebeard.”

“So soon?” I said.

“Not in the castle yet, but he’s been seen on the outskirts of town. His horses, Tabula, and the rest of his men.”

“So that’s it.” I sighed.

“We’ll try to distract him for a while,” the maid offered.

“No need,” I said. “You can only do that for how long?”

She pursed her lips and lowered her head, lacing her hands. “I really thought you’d be different.”

“Sorry to disappoint you.” I mocked her— and myself. “I guess I’m nothing but a naive and troubled fifteen-year-old who got pregnant by a man who plans to kill her.”

“You keep saying that.”

“Saying what?”

“That you’ve been troubled as a child. I really can’t see how.”

It’s then when flaming flashes from my childhood attacked my senses. Bloody memories, so dark and evil-stained I had to bury them in my childhood grave.

Who are you really, Erza? What about yourself haven’t you told in this diary? What about your childhood have you erased from your memories? Is that why the mirror frightens you? Because it can expose you?

I shrugged, hardly swallowing whatever dumb thought was stuck in my throat. Even without remembering details, it seemed like I maybe deserved this. How many people think of themselves as good while they aren’t? I bet Bluebeard doesn’t think of himself as an evil man. Deep in his mind, he must have found that deeply flawed logical reasoning behind his doings. Be it that he was only killing Lost Sevens, avenging himself for all the hurt he’d suffered, or even doing a favor to the world by killing the descendants of those who refused to pay the piper centuries ago.

“We’re all evil inside,” I said to the maid, standing up with my back to the door. “To one degree or another.”

“You’re convinced that ‘evil is a point of view’ are you?” she said, following my gaze toward the archway opposite to the door, the only one leading to the hall with the piano.

“Where did you hear that?” I said absently. Something about the piano seemed odd. It lay just opposite to the door I wanted to open. Far away, and only accessed through the archway, but right in front of Bluebeard’s door.

“Master Bluebeard likes this phrase,” she explained. “Mostly when someone accuses him of being evil.”

Her words trickled like raindrops in the background, barely audible or noticed by my senses. I found myself slowly walking toward the piano. I walked in a straight line from the door to where Bluebeard and I had kissed.

The key is door.

Reaching the piano, I brushed the tips of my fingers upon it. An overwhelming feeling of warmness ran through me. I was close to solving the puzzle, I knew that for sure. But how?

I opened the lid covering the piano keys and stared at it.

The key is door.

The key he had said? The key!

I ran my hands upon the piano’s keys. What did he say the notes were called?

The key is door.

Do, re, me, fa, so, la, ti. Those were the keys he’d taught me. And slowly I pressed the first note: Do.

A terrible shriek escaped me. “Son of a whore,” I mumbled.

The key isn’t ‘door’. The key is ‘*dore*’.

I swiveled to face Bluebeard’s portrait on the door in the distance, then took a deep breath. This is it. I solved the puzzle, I think.

After I’d played the do, now I played the re.

The portrait shook.

I played the two notes again. Do then Re. Dore

The portrait shook again. And again. I plucked the note again. It shook once more. The maids shook in awe, staring at the door’s parting, part of it to the left the other to the right.

Then the mirror's light shone through like a lightening's strike again. So strong it reached where I stood. Only this time it shone in red.

I knew what I had to do. I ran toward it.

"Hurry," the maid said, looking behind her. "Bluebeard is in the castle."

I ran, my heart heavy in my chest, my feet almost numb, and my mind reeling with possibility. Then I stopped in front of the mirror, standing before it. I could hear Bluebeard's voice roaring somewhere in the castle.

"Erza!" he screamed.

He was too late. I'd already stepped into the mirror. I'd known it all along. This wasn't just a mirror that reflected images. It kept secrets. Terrible secrets. Bluebeard's secrets.



The mirror led down some steps to a basement. A candle-lit, rotten-smelling, evil basement, it turned out.

I descended down the creaking steps, the smell of decayed bodies overwhelming me. I could have vomited. So easily. But I held back, and cried instead.

Why?

I already knew this was the smell of the wives he'd killed — the pregnant wives.

I descended even more until I reached a landing of unimaginable horrors. There were some kind of tubes hung on the walls. They were filled with liquid. Red liquid.

I followed their lead.

And in my journey into hell, I stumbled over something. I stumble forward, my cheek slapping sideways on someone's corpse. Sticky with mucus and whatever darkness lay in here. In my position, I found myself staring into a pair of eyes. Strung out and frozen with horror. Eyes that

pierced through me but without color. The dead eyes of one of his wives piled up in the basement.

“Erza!” Bluebeard’s voice echoed through the basement. “It’s too soon. Let me explain. Just wait for me. Don’t follow the tubes.”

I didn’t reply, and I wasn’t going to wait. For one, I had to run away, or I’d have died in here. I ran, struggling with the bodies I stepped upon on my way.

“They were pregnant for God’s sake!” I cried out.

The tubes led me to another set of stairs, leading upward. I ascended, the sound of Bluebeard’s steps following me.

“Don’t do it!” he shouted. “I can’t help you if you open the door. You’re not supposed to. It’s too soon!”

But there I stood, with the door wide open staring at something I couldn’t comprehend at once. The stairs and tubes had led me back into the bathroom, almost directly to the one shaped like a liver. The one I uncannily loved.

It wasn’t empty though. It was filled with the mixture of milk and chocolate, the smell of which I hated.

Then what were the tubes for?

Before I could inspect it, a flood of water pushed me forward. It came from the tubes, which, by some wicked design, were made to push whoever opened the door into the liver-shaped bathtub.

I glided without resistance. You can fight a beast, or anything solid, but it’s hard to fight water. It will strike you as harmless and weak, but great amounts of it is a force that—later I learned—would light up a bulb.

Like in a waterfall, I spiraled into the bathtub, unable to grip its edges. Bluebeard’s voice was gone. He couldn’t catch me.

When the water stilled, I couldn't move. My limbs were numb and I needed to steady myself out of the dizziness. It was the water’s smell that attacked me, though. It wasn’t water.

Blood.

That of tens of Bluebeard's previous wives.

Fighting the blurry visions ahead of me, I realized Bluebeard stood watching. This time he'd entered from the other door. The one we used frequently when we bathed together.

"What's going on?" I asked. I knew it was something terrible. And though my fate was sealed, I was curious to know before I was doomed forever.

"The ritual is complete," Bluebeard said, both satisfaction and disappointment gleaming in his eyes. Those eyes I saw in the portrait. Now they were real. I realized why they had confused me before. His stare hadn't been immersed into just pure evil. It was the kind of evil that was disappointed it couldn't achieve the optimum of evil it had planned.

Some evil isn't a point a view.

"Ritual?" I said while octopus's arms slithered out of the tub's sides and chained me. I was too shocked to resist anymore.

"The terrible witch had told me I had to marry tens of women, and only kill them when they're pregnant," he said. "I can't bear children," He chewed on the word, secretly mocking himself. "I mean, the most powerful man in history could not have a child—but that's beside the point. The witch said I could get the women impregnated through a spell. The spell demanded that the women be weakened by my absence, that I play games with their minds, so that they'd think they were partially in love with me." He stopped for a moment and said, "Then, when the spell worked and they became pregnant, I had to kill them."

"What are you talking about?" I could feel the blood rising to my neck and face. "Why kill them then if they'd granted you a child through that spell?"

"Because it wouldn't be my child," he said. "The women were only part of the ritual. I wasn't after their children, but their blood, which, if mixed with milk and chocolate, would be used on you, Erza."

“Me? All of those women were killed so you could do a ritual on me? Why?”

“Because only you can bear my children. Some kind of damned prophecy,” he said. “The troubled girl with evil tendencies would bear my children. If the ritual worked on you, it would cure me.”

“But I am pregnant!”

“Also a part of the ritual. The child inside you will mean nothing to me. It will be doomed from the day it is born until the world ends. The one I am after is the child you will give me after you lay there in the blood, milk, and chocolate for seven days.”

“You’re a monster,” I spat out, too short to reach him. “So the women weren’t descendants of the Lost Seven?”

“I let the maids believe that. I can’t find the Lost Seven. It’s been centuries. That’s why I need a son, in case I wither away and can’t live any longer.”

The mixture was covering me all over, only giving me a way to breath. I couldn’t believe I would be spending seven days in this rot. I thought I’d die from the horror before that.

Glancing back at Bluebeard, I didn’t understand why he seemed so disappointed. If his plan worked, and the ritual was taking place, why had he run after me in the basement and tried to stop me?

I asked him.

“Because I don’t know if the ritual will work now.” He made a fist with his hand. “You weren’t supposed to enter the bath until the full moon of the next month. I have no idea.” He gritted his teeth. "If you will be able to grant me a son.”

“Then set me free. I beg you. Set me free.”

“I can’t.” He turned and walked away. “The maids will feed you while I’m away. Seven day from now I will return. We will make love — if that’s what you want to call it. If you don’t grant me the son I want, I will feed you to my Bluebirds.”

The End of Grandmother's Diary



I stare back at Charlotte, watching her terrified face, knotted with fear and disbelief. She still held onto the wet pages of her book, her mouth agape, staring at me.

"What happened next?" she asked. "She couldn't have stopped the diary here?"

I myself needed room to breathe. The answers I was about to provide her with were about to shock her even more. Slow had always been a virtue of mine.

"Answer me, Angel. What happened next? Did she give him a child?" Charlotte demanded. "She must have, because she lived long enough to write this diary."

"She did survive the horrible incident," I answered her. "But not for granting him a child. Bluebeard remained childless for a long time."

"Then how and why did he let her live?"

"First, I need to make sure you realize that when I call Erza my grandmother, it's metaphorical. She's my great, great, great grandmother, if not four generations earlier."

"I get that part," she said impatiently. "Now tell me why Bluebeard let her live if she failed to grant him a child?"

"Because, even though the ritual failed, Erza came out someone— or something — else?"

"Did you just say something?"

"It's hard to explain." I rubbed my chin. "Let's just say that the Erza who survived the seven days in the tub wasn't human any longer."

“The failed ritual turned her into a beast?”

“One of it’s kind,” I said. “Or let me rephrase that: The first of her kind.”

“What do you mean?”

“You realize Bluebeard is the Piper, don’t you?”

“From the very first pages of the diary.”

“So you must have heard of the legend.”

“Which one exactly?”

“The one mentioned in Robert Browning’s famous poem about the Pied Piper.”

“Of course. It’s a masterpiece that secretly chronicled the real Piper’s life, though most people think it’s just a poem.”

“Remember the part that reads: And there it stands to this very day. And I must not omit to say that in Transylvania there's a tribe of alien people who ascribe?”

“Sure,” she said. “It explains how the Piper, after his escape, took the kids he’d kidnapped to Transylvania, where he eventually created the first…” Charlotte let out a strange, squeaky sound, and cupped her mouth with her hands.

“Say it,” I said.

“Vampire. The Piper created the first vampire in Transylvania,” she said. “Are you saying this is the town were Erza was from?”

“Exactly,” I nodded. “Only the poem never said the Piper created the first vampire by accident, through a flawed ritual of drowning his last wife in blood, milk, and chocolate for seven days.”

“Erza was the first vampire ever created,” she whispers to herself. “That’s why he let her live. He’d created a creature that would assist him in killing the Lost Seven.”

“There, you’ve got it.”

“That’s why she is your great-grandmother. Oh, Angel. I’m sorry I let you go through this again. I know how you hate…”

“My own kind,” I said. “I assume you have enough information to write in your Jane Eyre book now.”

“More than enough,” she said. “So much more that I can’t bring it to my pen.”

“Why?”

“Are you kidding me? Who’d believe me? I’ll stick to a Gothic feel of a story about a wife curious about her husband’s secret and his castle.”

“Do what you see is right,” I said. “Now, I’d like to have some time alone.”

“I know.” She nodded, standing up. The rain hadn’t stopped yet. You can’t argue with the rain in London. “Thanks for everything.”

I watched her leave, her blurry image looking like a jigsaw puzzle in the rain. My chest tightened with every step she took away, because I knew she’d stop and ask me one last thing. Sooner or later, she’d connect the dots and I’d have to answer her. Sooner or later, she’d realize that no matter how we’d like to think of things as good or evil, they’ll always stay a point of view.

And there, Charlotte stopped in the rain. There, she slowly turned around. There, she approached me with a face flushed red and asked. “Your grandmother’s name was Erza?”

“Yes.” I nodded, knowing she was close. So close.

“And Bluebeard’s castle was in Transylvania?”

“Yes.”

“But Erza mentioned she was from Hungary, not Romania.”

“The forest with the sign East of the Sun, West of the Moon could take you anywhere without knowing it,” I said. “In fact, the castle itself, which would later be known as the Schloss, has a life of its own. It can be anywhere, anytime. But you know that already. You’ve lived in it.”

“I do, but…” Her hands traced her quivering lips.

“But?”

“Erza is short for Erzsébet in that region.”

“You got that right,” I said, a faint smile showing on my face.

“Erzsébet means Elizabeth.”

“That’s true.”

“The only woman that fits this description is…”

“Yes,” I interrupted. “It’s her. The first vampire in history. The one who bathed in the blood of young girls. She was made by a descendant of the first serial killer in history—that’s if Gilles de Rais wasn’t the Piper, too.”

Charlotte sat down next to me, mopping her forehead. “I can’t believe it. Ezra is Elizabeth Bathory, the troubled child who sliced rats as a child and ended up swimming in girl’s blood for the rest of her life.”

End of Diary

MY NOTES

Written by the Beast

According to the many reference books I found in the library, the connection to *Jane Eyre* is factual and accurate. Author Charlotte Brontë admitted to Bluebeard being an inspiration – like many authors later.

Gilles de Rais is a real-life character who lived a few centuries back. His name had always been mentioned side by side with Elizabeth Bathory. Both of them are documented as history's first mass murderers – also called serial killers in some books.

Gilles de Rais murdered his wives, Bathory killed teenagers and swam in their blood. She was probably the first so-called vampire in history.

Historian say that Elizabeth did get mysteriously pregnant and lose a child at the age of fifteen before she'd been married to Ferenc Nádasdy, a Hungarian nobleman who travelled a lot, leaving her all alone in the Nádasdy Castle in Sárvár, Hungary.

Ferenc Nádasdy traveled to Vienna, the city of music, and studied music, was obsessed with pianos, among other things. Was Ferenc Nádasdy also the Piper and Bluebeard?

I did figure out the piano earlier. Elizabeth's naivety made me want to scream at the her.

Something tells me this prequel is going to haunt me for some time. It made me remember my sisters back in my homeland. All of them wanted to get married at such young ages. I fear for them falling for the likes of Bluebeard – though I don't think they would succumb to marrying a forty-year-old man. Elizabeth was a disturbed child. Who knows what of her true reason behind marrying Bluebeard. Was she escaping a certain evil at home?

This prequel, though it has no answers about me, cements the idea that the Brothers Grimm mentioned they never meant their fairy tales for children. We just love to think so.

The next diary is told by Sandman Grimm, who's written a prequel before. From what I gather, he'd been trusted with collecting the prequels. I wonder if he knows about this library.



Grimm Prequel #22

Thirteen Years of Snow

as told by Sandman Grimm

Dear diary,

Some people ask me, "Sandman, we know you've collected all the diaries you could among the years. We love them, but is it true that you've kept some of them secret and never published?"

My answer would be, "No, I published everything I came across. The Books of Sand chronicles are all that I know."

Except that this a lie.

In truth, I've come across other diaries, sometimes stories I collected from several scattered and unfinished diaries, that I've never brought to light. Diaries that made me tremble while reading. Diaries I regret having read.

Why?

Because they're darker than the bottom of a whale's belly. Some things were just not meant to be told – trust me on that.

"But you're supposed to expose *all* fairy tales," you might say. "Hell, you're Sandman Grimm, and we already know that these diaries are like poisoned apples. Once we've tasted them, we'll never be the same again."

Well, that's true. I said that, and I have kept my word. Only the diaries I left out are not poisoned apples. They're rotten ones. I'm not sure you'd still like me after letting you read them.

But still, so many people ask for those diaries. Those horrific fairy tales in their optimum blackness. Diaries like those make you wonder if fairy tales were written by the source of all darkness itself.

And yet, here I am, about to tell you one of the most shocking stories I've ever read. The kind of story where you end up thanking the Brothers Grimm for never retelling it in their collections.

“I can’t publish this,” I remember Charmwill telling me once. “I can’t even read it again.” His face was pure disgust and horror.

“But it concerns some of the most beloved characters,” I had told him, trying to reason it in my own mind.

“This is exactly one of the reasons we had to curse and bury them in the Dreamworld, Sandman,” Charmwill had said. “Besides, I can’t believe what they have done to my parrot, Pickwick.”

Then he’d left me stranded by my own.

Since then, I’ve buried the story in the back of my mind and never even admitted I knew it to myself. But like I said, many people ask me about the darker, I mean the really darker side of Sorrow, and here I am about to tell you about one.

When I say darker, I don’t mean violent or bloody. I don’t mean scary and devilish. I mean the darker side of humanity — if you’d consider fairy tale characters humans. How come man has taken such a turn in life?

Enough with my introduction. Prepare yourself for a terrible tale. I feel the need to suggest you stop reading now, or this story will tear your heart apart.

This is going to be dark. Very, very dark…

Once upon a time, a man known by the name of Long John Silver, (also known as Captain Ahab, among a few other names) had been obsessed with the sea — and a whale. I’m sure you’ve heard about him in other diaries. Almost every story in the Seven Seas mentions him in one way or another.

John was vicious man, keenly sly, and brutally unforgiving. More so after he lost his leg to a whale. Some would say his upbringing was harsh and that he’d been a good man once. But I have no evidence of this in my diaries.

At some point John’s obsession with the sea escalated to madness. That happened after he had learned about a treasure buried in a place some called Treasure Island, which in reality was called Neverland.

Since then, he'd devoted his life in the name of the Pied Piper, who had also been searching for the treasure, among other things like a flute, or song, that would let him rule the world.

Only few people knew about John being married, his wife abandoned in a house on an isolated island of very few people. The island was one stretch of perpetual snow that his wife had been imprisoned on for life inside her house.

Little could she venture outside in the deadly snow, but every so often, she got to visit her neighbors and socialize with those who sold groceries and salt.

That hadn't been just fate or coincidence. John had planned this. He'd wanted his wife as far away from the world as possible. Not because she was bad.

It was he who was bad.

John had known so many women in his life, in adulterous ways. He'd even killed some of them so they won't expose him, then he fled to the sea with their bodies, dumping them once he was far out and hidden from the steepest mast on the horizon.

Then one day when he'd desired a son, he married a chaste woman from the island mentioned. He'd sensed her nobility and love for motherhood and that she'd give him a good looking and smart son — and take care of him while John was on the sea.

His wife was kept on this island so she'd be as far as possible from the men he knew. In John's mind, many men wanted to avenge him for sleeping with their wives. That's why he kept his marriage a secret and his wife in a faraway place from the men who'd want to hurt him, and her.

The last time he'd left his wife, John hadn't been very good to her. He treated her like a slave and even hit her a couple of times. His drunken nights, spent singing *hi ho silver*, were usually his pleasure and his wife's pain.

But leaving for another long sail, his wife sang the news to him. "I'm pregnant, John."

She'd told him so he would be pleased and so he'd love her and stop hurting her. And though John didn't change, he'd been eager to come home to the son his wife must have birthed by then.

Night after night, John had thought about this. A son that would carry his name. A son that he'd teach how to sail, and a son who'd inherit his obsession with whales – and treasures – in case John got killed in the sea — which had been very probable.

When he'd returned home to his abandoned wife, John demanded to see his son. His wife, lowered her head, worried he'd hurt her again, confessed it wasn't a boy, but a girl.

"I don't want a girl." John choked her. "I don't like girls."

His wife worried their girl would hear this. Even though she was just an infant, she didn't want her daughter to feel inferior at such young age. And by whom? Her own father.

"What's wrong with girls?" she protested.

"Everything is wrong with girls," John said. "You know how many I've had of them? They're good for nothing. I wouldn't have one of them in my crew." Then he stopped thinking about it. "Well, except one. Her name was Carmilla."

"Get out," his wife screamed. "Why did you marry me then?"

"So you'd give me a son."

"And what do I have in return? Nothing. You don't even love me."

"You want to know what you get in return? My protection. You're a weak woman in this world and only strong men like me can protect you and your daughter."

"She's your daughter, too."

"No, she isn't. I want a son. And I'm not leaving for the sea before I make sure you're pregnant again."

And John stuck to his word. His wife was pregnant when he left for sea again. And before he left he told her: "If you give birth to a girl again, bury

her in the snow, or I'll come bury you and your already-born, sweetheart."

John's wife watched him limp away in the snow — as he couldn't use his cane in the mushy whites — and wished she had the guts to stab him in the back.

But she couldn't.

John was the embodiment of darkness. The sea, and the whale he was after, had messed up with his head, not to mention his mysterious connection to the Pied Piper himself.

John's wife, whose name will remain unspoken in this diary, for reason I'd not like to discuss at the moment, had never been in love with him. She had married to escape a bitter past — which I may also discuss in another diary.

And so John walked out, leaving her with a cruel choice to make. Because what if she gave birth to a girl again?



In the months to come, Long John Silver, famously known as Captain Ahab at the time, continued his hunt after the whale Moby Dick. His obsession grew with every tide that passed, every storm he survived, and every whale he killed that wasn't Moby Dick.

His obsession with that treasure in Neverland increased as well. It was as if Ahab was always either chasing a whale or a treasure, both of which, to my vast knowledge, never has ended up being the right one so far. Neverland is most likely an island on the back of a whale called Moby Dick — but I'm not quite sure yet.

In those times, John hardly remembered his wife back home. And in those times he bedded women from every shore in the Seven Seas. John drank, smoked his pipe, and sometimes even played it for musical pleasure.

Four years passed and John was due to come home.

All the way back to the cottage almost buried in the snow of the isolated island, he thought about his son. *He must be four years old now,* he thought.

Eagerness shaped his soul as stepped closer to the cottage.

Then he stopped at the doorstep.

What if his wife hadn't given him a son? What if it was just another weak and useless girl? John picked up his cane, his face dimming already. What would he tell the other sailors back at sea — though not many knew of his wife at the time? That he could not conceive a son? Last time, he'd been so embarrassed he could not confess the birth of his first child: a girl.

These were dark ages in the world, when being a man was everything, and a woman was, well, something that came after man.

To his surprise, someone pulled the door open before he even knocked. It was his daughter, jumpy and merry, wanting to hug and kiss her long gone father.

"Get away from me." John shoved her aside, using his cane to walk into the house. "Where is your mother?"

The child had been so shocked that she could not answer, because she was drowning in tears.

"I'm here." The mother walked out of the back room in her rugged dress. She had been cooking. The look on her face didn't please John. She must have given birth to a girl again.

John asked her if what on his mind were true.

"Of course not," she said with a smirk on her face. "It's a boy."

To John's delight, his boy child came walking into the room then, staring up at him. John knelt down on his cane and only foot, misty eyed and arms wide.

The child didn't come. It was afraid.

John certainly looked scary with his long bushy beard and scars on his face — not to mention the missing leg.

"I'm your father." He waved his hand to beckon the boy closer. "Come to me. I will show things you've never seen. I will take you sailing all over the world with me."

Still, the child didn't want to come. All until his mother gently encouraged him to. "He loves you," she told her son. "He really loves you."

Reluctantly the boy stomped toward the big sailor, while the mother took the unloved girl in her arms, promising her a good meal.

"I don't want a meal," the girl said.

"Then what would my little angel wish?" her mother asked. "You just have to wish and I will grant it for you."

"I want my father to love me."

The mother sighed and hugged her even closer. Then she said nothing. Her poor girl had wished for the one thing that was impossible. The mother was sure of it.

John almost lost himself for a year with his son, teaching him, playing with him, and neglecting the mother and daughter. He wished to take him aboard the next time they set sail and proudly show himself in front of his sailors. But he thought his boy was still too young.

"Later," he told himself. "When you're at least thirteen-year-old."

"Why thirteen?" asked the boy.

"I first sailed when I was thirteen, boy, so shall you follow in the footsteps of your father."



Back at sea again, John was on top of the world. By that I don't mean he'd turned into a kind and loving man. He began drinking ferociously, meeting more women, and taking more lives. In the end, he was still just a pirate.

His next mission, ordered by the Piper I suppose, was to hunt down a boy named Jim Hawkins, who was really Peter Pan. John was supposed to locate him on a small neglected island where he lived with his mother. The Piper had killed Peter Pan's father a few years earlier, in the sea, but could not find Peter's island.

In his quest, John met a man who claimed he was the devil, which made him laugh.

“I’ve always considered myself the devil,” John had said proudly.

“Well, you’re not,” the clumsy sailor said. “I am. I inherited. Father to son to grandson. It’s always been me.”

“But you’re worthless. Why do people fear you?”

“It’s propaganda.”

“Why?”

“I need a following, so I made up stories about myself.”

“Worked just fine, I have to say.” John laughed and gulped his drink. “So you how can you help me, Mr. Devil, to find this Jim Hawkins boy.”

“I know how you can find the island. It’s concealed even though it’s right in front of you,” the Devil explained. “A magic spell Jim’s father used to protect his son before he died.”

“Can you break spell?”

“Already done. However, I need a favor.”

“What would that be?”

“When you catch Peter – Jim – or whatever his real name is, I want him to spend a year with me.”

“What kind of favor is that?” John grunted. “With you where?”

“In Hell.”

Now John laughed hard. “So it’s real? There is a Hell?”

“Not as dark as you’ve been told, but yeah, there is.”

“So all those myths about Hell were propaganda, too?”

“I’m a great marketer,” the Devil said. “I can sell anything.”

“Marketer?” John huffed. “You mean musketeer?”

“Nope, Mark-et-ter. It’s a word that hasn’t been invented yet. Sometimes I can travel to the future.”

“You’re a funny man.” John, now drunk, patted him heavily on his shoulders. “Funny man. What did you say your name was?”

The Devil sighed.

“Oh yes, Devi,” John said. “I’ll call you Captain Devi. But if you’re so much of a devil, shouldn’t you easily be apt enough to take this Peter boy to Hell with you?”

“It’s complicated. I have powers but then I don’t have all the powers.”

“Whatever the heck that means,” John sputtered. “I’ll give you the boy, just after I find him and make him lead me to the treasure island.”

“Neverland, you mean.”

“Whatever it’s called. I want to find it. I have my reasons.”

“Deal.” The Devil offered a shaking hand.

John looked uncomfortable. “First of all, pirates don’t shake hands.”

“Ah, sorry,” the Devil said, embarrassed. “So I take it that’s your word I have?”

“Never trust a pirates word. It’s like an eye patch over an eye that sees well.”

“So what do we do?”

“I don’t know,” John said. Then he lowered his voice, whispering conspiratorially. “Maybe sign a contract in blood.”

The Devil rolled his eyes. “Really?”

“I thought you’re all about propaganda?”

“That’s *my* sales pitch, but when it’s time to make the deal, I get all serious.”

“Sales pitch?” John laughed again. “I have no idea where you get your expressions from. Anyhow, consider it done. Peter leads me to the island, and I will send him to you.”

“Thank you,” the Devil said and walked away.

Then he suddenly stopped without turning around. “Ah, I forgot to tell you.”

“About what?”

“Your son.” The Devil turned around. This time he mildly scared John. Just mildly. It was that sinisterly deceiving look in his eyes.

“What about my son?” John’s face dimmed. He’d mentioned he had a son, but never talked more about him to the sailor. He worried about whatever this freak in front of him knew about his son.

“I have bad news about him.”

“What happened?” John worried, dropping his drink. “Is he hurt?”

“Actually not,” The Devil said, flashing a gloved finger in the air.

“Then what is it about him? How do you know anything about him?”

“I know things, trust me,” The Devil said. “And I tend to be honest with people I do business with, so I need to tell you about your son.”

“If you don’t speak up now, I will pull your eyes out of their sockets, stuff a snake inside and sew an eye patch to your lids, leaving you forever in agony and fear.”

“Ease down, Captain Ahab,” Devi smiled, nonchalantly. “You’re a bad man. But someone was badder.”

“What do you mean? Who is?”

“Your wife.” Devi smirked.

“I don’t understand,” John said, though the picture had already begun shaping in his head. He’d felt something was wrong about his son before, and now his head spun with morbid possibilities. “What about her”

“It’s nothing about her. It’s about what she has done.”

“She has done something to my son?”

“She has done something to you, using your son.”

“Speak up!” John roared.

“I think you know what I am going to say.”

“Speak you evil little sleaze!”

“I’d prefer to whisper this in your ear,” The Devil smiled. “It’s too confidential to say it out loud.”

John tolerated the tease and let him near his right ear. “Your son, Johnny boy, isn’t your son.”

John gritted his teeth, and readied his fist to punch him in the face. “That’s not possible.”

“Oh, it is,” Devi whispered. “When your wife had a miscarriage and was so scared you’d come and kill her and your daughter, she had to use her talents.”

“She had a miscarriage?” John realized his cane could not balance him anymore with all the drink and truth, so he leaned onto the side of the bar. “What talents?”

“The same talent you have. Only you used it too many times with too many women. She only used it once. With one man.”

John held his breath so he wouldn’t explode. He could easily slay a thousand whales right now. “Are you saying…?”

“Indeed, your wife introduced you to a son who is three-years-old not four; one she had with a stranger who you — and her for that matter — may never see again.”

“But that should also be impossible,” John countered, his breath heavy. “I’ve precisely isolated her in a far away and snowy island where only few families live. They live far away from her and the men would not dare come close to her.”

“It was a stranger, Johnny,” the Devil seemed to enjoy it. “In my opinion it’s your fault much as hers. You pushed her too far, but hey,” he pulled back, his voice louder, audible for everyone in the bar, then collected himself and adjusted his suit. “I’m just the Devil. What do you I know about human darkness?”



At this point, and as a chronicler of all things fairy tales, I, Sandman Grimm, should point out who Long John Silver a.k.a. Captain Ahab really is.

In my research I found bits and pieces of details from various diaries, or so-called Books of Sand. It’s clear that Long John Silver is Captain Ahab — it really makes a lot of sense, considering the absurd similarities of the characters in literature — but it’s a whole other thing when you know who John’s ancestors are.

It would come across as shocking, and slightly unbelievable, but it’s what the other diaries suggest — though I still haven’t been able to confirm it.

It’s my assumption that Long John Silver is a descendant of King Henry VIII.

I know. I thought the same thing. It just can’t be. But neither is it believable that a whale bit off only a man’s leg, and has not eaten the rest of him, considering how enormous a whale’s mouth is.

Anyways, I’m just a keeper of books whose job is to pass on what I’ve found out.

Who was King Henry VIII, some might ask?

Well, many things. Some feebly good, and many terribly bad. King Henry was known for killing many. And by many, I mean more than you think a man can kill. In the sake of not being so vague, King Henry married a lot, and was cruel to his wives, and killed some of them — though some historians may argue otherwise.

The point being, is that in my studies I've found the lines King Henry's descendants the cruelest men to their wives. Which made me think that Long John Silver would sail back home and kill his wife and daughter immediately — I warned you of the darkness of this diary, I must remind you.

And though it would have pained me to know of the mother and daughter's deaths, it would have seemed the natural turn of events.

But John didn't.

In fact, it's been documented that he did not return home until a year after learning about his wife's adultery.

John simply sailed, on an on, killing more whales, killing those who opposed them, standing on the edge of his ship, smoking his pipe, and staring at the sea.

In between, he sent his men to Neverland, to lull Peter Pan on board, but a series of complex events made the endeavor impossible — the Devil's spell wasn't enough to find the island; John ended up finding it many years later when Peter Pan, and his son, were thirteen years of age.

Instead, Long John Silver revolted against his mentor, a pirate by the name of Captain Flint. John raided his master's ship and killed everyone on it, so only he and his crew would find Treasure Island one day.

Only one thing survived that raid. Captain Flint's parrot.

Though John disdained the parrot, for it would repeat his words and gibber out nonsensical ones, he realized he may want to keep it, and ended up feeding it and befriending it.

"What's your name, annoying bastard?" John asked the parrot that he had locked in a cage aboard the ship.

"Will you set me free, if I tell you?" the parrot quaked.

"I might," John said. "I might even send you on a mission."

"What will I gain from such a mission?"

"Protection." John was carving the table with a sharp knife.

“From who?” the parrot countered.

“From me.” John licked the knife with the tip of his tongue. “You see, I kill almost anyone who annoys me, and no one ever stops me. So by obeying me unconditionally, I reward you with never hurting you,” he laughed. “I made that deal with my wife.”

The parrot stubbornly folded it wings (not a small feat for a parrot) and looked away. It was a proud parrot, a little devious from being raised by Captain Flint. “They call me Pickwick.”

“Pickwick the Parrot,” John mused. “I like it.”

“So what is my mission?”

“I will send you to the island where my wife and daughter live.” John stabbed the knife into the table. “I want you to spy on my wife and come tell me what you hear.”

“About what?”

“About who the real father of my son is.”



It’d be useful to note that Pickwick had later been found by Charmwill Glimmer, who managed to turn the cocky parrot into a good one.

As for John, he spent the next few months admiring the story about the Piper’s flute and the song that controlled the world. It’s my assumption that John directly worked for the Pied Piper, though some diaries contradict the idea. John had always mentioned being contacted by the Piper, but without evident proof to support the declaration.

It’s still hard to confirm that, but they were definitely on the same side of evil.

Pickwick returned and confirmed the boy wasn’t John’s.

“Did you hear her say it?”

“In her prayers,” Pickwick nodded.

“Just that? She didn’t talk to anyone about it?”

“She is almost imprisoned in the middle of the snow,” Pickwick said. “Only a few times she crossed over to the market for groceries and salt in her sleigh pulled by an old reindeer. There is none she can talk to.”

“But God,” John thought out loud. “What did she say?”

“That she regrets betraying you as a wife, but she had to save her daughter and herself from you wrath.”

“So she bedded another man?”

“She never spoke of this part, neither did she mention his name. She only mentioned he was from the Kingdom of Sorrow, which is not far away from the island.”

Silence fell on John for some time while Pickwick cleaned his feathers. John knew what Pickwick had been thinking. He’d been contemplating if John was going to kill his wife – still.

John didn’t utter a word. He only smirked and ordered the men to set sail back to the island where his family lived.



For days, John tortured his wife and made his daughter watch. I’ll exempt myself from being graphic here, but you get the idea.

John didn’t want to kill her. Just pain her deeply and physically because he wanted to know the name of the father. His wife would not give in for some reason. John threatened to hurt the girl, but that one had grown coy and sly now. She hid under the bed, in the basement, and sometimes buried herself in the snow so he could not find her.

With all his wrath and power, his little daughter outsmarted the pirate. She’d even managed to bring food to her mother behind his back.

“How does she do it?” John roared at his wife, strapped in shackles in the kitchen.

“She’s lived all of her childhood in the snow,” his wife challenged him. “You see that fast and wide blinding white outside. She sees it differently. She sees hedges, curves, and roads that no man has ever footed. She can tolerate the cold and feed herself out there. You will never catch her.”

“Then I will hurt the boy if you don’t speak.”

“I dare you. Hurt him and tell your men what? That you discovered he wasn’t your son and killed him? You’d die before admitting this to them!” She laughed in his face.

“You little witch!” John fisted his hand and bit himself, drawing blood that dripped onto the floor.

“You will never know, and you will live in pain forever.”

“Not if I kill you and rid myself of you,” he dared her and picked up the knife.

But something happened then. Someone called John from outside the house. John turned and went to open the door. Who would know of this place in the middle of the snow?

It’s hard for me to tell you who was outside and what happened between him and John, for it has never been documented in any of the diaries I’ve come across. How so, when John never wrote a diary and the man he met still remains a mystery? Neither had his daughter heard the conversation out there in the snow.

But you might guess what they talked about when you reach the end of this diary — that’s if you’ll can still breathe regularly by then.

When John got back in the house, his wife could see that something had happened to him. She could not say whether it was his demeanor or eyes. He seemed like someone else. Someone… peaceful.

She watched him unshackle her gently, apologizing for what he was and how he treated her. He washed her hands and her feet then went to cook for her.

He then summoned his daughter, kissed her forehead and invited her to the table. His son, too.

They held hands and prayed and ate.

Unbelievable as it may have been, John had metamorphosed into a good father for the next six months. He'd even ditched his sails.

It took the mother a few months to trust him. She was baffled, but the man would not hurt anyone. He'd read for the children and played with them in the snow. He'd even made a snowman with his daughter and son in the name of his love to them. They stuck six carrots in one side of the snow man and five in the other. One side was his daughter's age. The other his son's.

They agreed on sticking a new carrot for each year that passed.

"John," the mother asked John one night, sleeping peacefully side by side in the same bed. "What happened that day with the man outside?"

"You mean the man who summoned me when I was about to…"

"To kill me, yes." She liked to remind him of things like these, so she'd read better into him, still partially not trusting him. "Who was he?"

"A good man," John nodded. "He showed me the way to the light."

"Are you saying he was some kind of a phantom, that God sent him to you?"

"You can say so."

"But you're not planning on ever telling me who he is?"

"I will. One day. When the time is right."

"I have to be honest with you, John," she said. "It's hard to believe you've changed after a ten minute conversation with that man."

"I know," John touched her face gently. "I understand. I'm a terrible man. Was, a terrible man. To be honest, part of my wickedness still stays with me. I'm praying it would fade with each day I spend happily with you and the children."

For a moment, she rubbed his hand onto her cheek and closed her eyes. But her inner instinct told her to push it off again.

“What’s wrong?” John asked.

“Are you expecting me to believe you’re willing to live with a son that’s not yours?”

“I’m treating him like my son, aren’t I?”

“You do, and it drives me mad,” she said. “You’ve even stopped asking who the father is.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore.”

“How so? It doesn’t make sense.”

“It doesn’t matter because whatever sin you’ve committed, you did because of me. I pushed you into it. You feared me and wanted to save your daughter’s life.”

She wondered why he said 'your daughter' not 'our daughter' but she didn’t comment. “And?”

“I have to accept the consequences of my wickedness, and so I will try to compensate you and the kids and love you until all of you forgive me.”

She was speechless. He had been like that for months. Every angle she investigated of him always proved he’d changed for the better. She’d even secretly followed him when he smoked his pipe alone on the top of snowy hill so as not to harm the children by the smoke. Even then, he seemed to have changed into a good man. She’d even see him wash the reindeer and mend its wound and feed it every day. Then when he was back, he’d sit by the fire and pray.

It was all true, but also unfathomable.

“Could I ask you one thing?” John said, breaking the silence.

“Of course.”

“I want you to promise me something.”

“If I can.”

John took her face in his hands and gently stared in her eyes. Even then she could not see wickedness in those eyes. It was as if this wasn't John anymore, but the man who'd knocked on the door, now in John's body.

"I want you to promise me that when I die you will forgive me for each day I sinned before I changed."

She was speechless.

"Of course I will," she said. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Just do it. If not for me, then for the children. Let them remember me as the good father, not the bad."

That was the night when she started to warm up to him. Was something going to happen to John, something that would make him change, or something that would soon take her away from him?



It's hard to exactly chronicle all the incidents to this story, since I've collected them from various diaries. All I know is that at some point there was no doubt about Long John Silver's change. All until he sailed away again.

"I need to bring food to the table," he told his wife. "A year's sail will do that."

"Who are you sailing with?" the wife said skeptically. "The pirates again?"

"I promise I won't. I will sail on a good man's boat, catch the fish, and sell it on the shore like any decent man."

The wife could still read nothing but sincerity in his eyes. She let him kiss her on the forehead and watching him limp away in the snow, toward the nearest shore.

"John." She couldn't help it.

He turned around slowly. "Yes, darling."

“I’m going to miss you.”

John smiled. “You’ve never said that to me before.”

“That’s because that other man was never the real you. I love you.”



But John did not keep his promise. He sailed with his brash and cruel pirates again. In fact, once he set foot on the boat, none of his recent demeanor stayed with him. He was Captain Ahab again, a ruthless pirate, womanizer, drinker, and whale hunter.

The months went by and the ship made a lot of money. The search for Peter Pan’s island was still on — and the whale of course. John met a lot of people on the way, including the Queen of Sorrow, whom he treated surprisingly well due to a prophecy he had to fulfill. It’s said that this act, too, was influenced by the Pied Piper, who secretly contacted him every once in a while.

While the Queen of Sorrow, still a young girl in love with Angel Von Sorrow, was on his boat, John kept to himself most of the time, pretending to be hiding in his room. He wasn’t. He spent his time eavesdropping on Carmilla’s story. Part of it was fulfilling the Piper’s prophecy; part of it was wondering if he could know of the identity of the man who’d bedded his wife and gave him an illegitimate son.

He found out, though.

After the queen left his boat in a climax of events, John was thought dead. He survived. Again, I’m not interested in this side of the story now. All you need to know is that he led another ship soon after, and continued his sailing through the Seven Seas.

Not only did he survive, but so did Pickwick, the magical Parrot.

“Go back to the island and spy on my wife,” demanded John.

“Again?”

“Just do as I say or I’ll rip your feathers out, one by one.”

“What do you want me to overhear this time?”

“Anything. Everything. Tell me how she is doing without me.”

“Oooh,” Pickwick wheezed. “You aren’t really in love with her? All this is an act about becoming a good family man.”

“Who said it’s an act?” John smoked his pipe.

“What else could it be? I mean you’re still the most vicious pirate I’ve ever known.”

“That’s because I need to bring food to the table,” John said absently, staring outside the window. “I am a new man back home, but out here in the world I know nothing but the job I do.”

“You could have at least tried.”

“Tried and did what?”

“You could have tried becoming a barber,” Pickwick suggested. “A cook, maybe, since you cook very well. Why haven’t you tried to get a job as a decent cook and feed your family?”

“None of the other pirates will let me,” John argued. “You know what kind of enemies I have all over the world. I’d take a noble job at some place and some two-cent pirate would spot me a week later. They wouldn’t leave me alone.”

“You could change the way you look.”

“How much of disguise can a one-legged man have, Pickwick?” John shot him an accusatory look.

Pickwick shrugged. It sounded like a hiccup. Then he itched his head. “I see.”

“I’m a doomed man. My past is hunting me. Now go find out if my wife still loves me and my kids. Find out if she believes me.”

Pickwick nodded and fluttered away.

In that time, John continued his sailing. Raiding a ship that transported books, of all things. John was furious. The raid was a failure. They hardly owned food or gold, and best use of books he could think of was burn them for warmth on the colder nights.

“What is this?” he asked his men. “Why would people have all of these books?”

“They read them,” one sailor said.

John chopped off his head immediately. “Why would a person waste his time on reading a book, let alone all these books?” He rubbed his chin.

None of the other sailors offered an answer, of course.

“Is reading books profitable in any way?” he asked. “Answer me, damn it!”

One sailor stepped up and reluctantly said, “None that we know of, Captain. Unless you consider knowledge profitable.”

“Knowledge?” John grimaced. “You can know things from reading about them?”

“It appears so.”

John stooped and picked up a book. He stared at the title. “One Thousand and One Nights?”

“It’s an Arabian collection of fairy tales,” the sailor said.

“What could fairy tales teach me?”

“It’s a different kind of book. It’s fiction.”

“Fic-what?”

“A story. A made up one.”

“You mean a lie?” John grinned.

“Lies that people love to read about. Well, sometimes they even think they’re true.”

“Those readers are delusional, then? All who’d embarked this ship, too. Why would people want to be delusional?”

“It passes the time, Captain.”

“I’d prefer passing the time smoking or hunting something.”

“Not everyone is like you, but may I suggest something?”

“Make it countable, or I spill your blood.”

“Why not give the book a try. I know you can read. This is an English translation.”

“Why would I want to waste my time on an illusion?”

“I heard it’s very satisfactory. It’s like building castles in the sky. It’s magical. And addictive. It should bring you a lot of pleasure.”

“Pleasure as good as smoking my pipe?”

“I heard it’s even more. Books can even be your best friend.”

In no way did John understand any of this, but eventually he decided to give it a try. And what a try it was.

Soon, John could not stop reading, spending nights in his room, tossing and turning unable to sleep before finishing the next story. One part had attracted him best. The story of the smart Scheherazade, who postponed King Shahryar’s wrath by telling him a story each night. King Shahryar was known for killing his wives the day after bedding them — the kind of king Long John Silver admired — but then came Scheherazade and her masterful storytelling, enticing him with a new tale each night, ending it with the cliffhanger.

King Shahryar could not kill her, or he would not have learned of the rest of the story. This continued for several months, until Shahryar had fallen in love with her. And though she’d finished her stories, he could not bring himself to kill her, as he’d grown attached to her. He’d basically fallen in love with the storyteller. And it was time that made it harder for him to rid himself of her.

John closed the book with a wide grin on his face. The word ‘time’ was the key. If you’re attached to someone over time it’s harder and harder to lose them.

What a beautiful story he’d thought.

Then a knock came on his door.

“What is it?” John said.

“We’re sailing back home.”

“Why?”

“It’s been a year. The men need to go home to their families and then start another sail later.”

“It’s already been a year?” John jumped out of bed and pulled the door open.

“Yes, Captain,” the sailor said.

“But I thought it was only a few months? How did that happen?”

The sailor politely glanced at the book in John’s hand. “You’ve been reading this ever since. You almost don’t sleep and rarely eat. And never came out to lead the sails.”

Shocked, John lifted up the book to his eye level. “The book did this to me?”

“You must have enjoyed it so much.”

John’s face dimmed and his forehead wrinkled. He pushed the book against the sailor’s chest. “Take it and burn it!”

“But you seemed to love it.”

“That was before I realized it’s haunted!” John exclaimed. “A book that does this to a man is the work of the Devil!”

“The Devil?” the sailor grinned. “You mean that skinny man who works with you.”

John rolled his eyes. “No him. The real Devil.”

“But he is the real Devil.”

John sighed. “He is, true. But I’m talking about the devil we imagine in our head. The red one with the forked tail and dark eyes. The scary one.”

The sailor looked confused and perplexed.

“Just do as I say and burn the book!”

“As you wish, Captain.”

John closed the door and began readying himself to go back. His wife and children could not know about his pirate practicing. He had to return to that good John again.

But first, Pickwick was back.

“What did you learn?” he asked the parrot.

“She loves you more than you can think.”

John smiled, let out a long sigh. “And my daughter.”

“She loves her more every day.”

John’s smile widened. “And my son.”

“He isn’t your son.”

“Don’t be like that,” John argued. “I consider him my son now. How does she feel about him?”

“I can tell you she loves him so much.”

Now John’s smile ate at his face. It was too big of a smile, Pickwick thought it was a bit scary.



But nothing scary happened back on the snowy island. Year after year, Captain Ahab returned home and was a good father. He loved his wife, and

raised his children. He watched them grow up, then sailed for another six months or a year to bring food on the table. In his sails he killed and stole, and did everything a good man shouldn't. But never at home. Never.

His wife admired him sticking up a newer carrot into the snowman outside every year and watched her children grow up beautifully. Now her daughter was eleven, the boy nine. She could not wait until the day came where they stuck something like fourteen or fifteen carrots in the snowman.

A four-member family, far away in the snow, sharing love and happiness. Life was beautiful.

And even though she occasionally suspected John was a different man on the Seven Seas, like most wives, she looked away from the fact, and reasoned that a man could not change all of his past. As long as his family mattered the most to him.

Sometimes she'd caught a glimpse of that colorful parrot outside her window and wondered if it was some sign of good omens to come. She loved the parrot, but it never succumbed to her attempt to feed him.

In her prayers, she thanked God for the man John had become. She didn't ask about leaving the island, or for more friends and neighbors, nor did she ask for more money — John had been providing so much already. She only asked for forgiveness of her sin with another man in the past. She'd come to realize that not only had John been a bad man, but she had been a bad woman as well. And that somehow she'd been forgiven.

She had simply given up on the virtue of patience. If she'd only had waited for John to change. How had it never come across as a solution: to pray for her husband's change into a better man?

As for the man who changed John, she'd given up asking. John has said she'd know when the time would come, though it hadn't for so many years.

Her daily prayer consisted of two things: First, she asked for forgiveness and that her son's real father would never show up and disrupt the balance of her family — it was unlikely because the man had never known of her pregnancy.

Her second prayer was about John's relationship with the son who wasn't his. Though John had been good to the boy, she feared his fatherhood, his blood and bone, would kick in and that he'd wake up not loving the boy, and only loving the girl.

Then, on a night of intolerable cold, she saw the parrot outside her kitchen window again. Thinking it'd freeze, she pulled the window open and it flew in, and settled proudly upon the table.

"I'm Pickwick," the parrot said — that was years before it turned mute of course.

Absorbing the shock, the mother sat next to it in silence, wondering if she had just heard it talk. She'd just come out of prayer, and her heart was open for whatever the universe suggested to her.

"Did you just talk to me?" she asked.

"I did," Pickwick said. "And I do not wish to explain how it's possible."

"Then what *do* you wish to *talk* about?" She longed to touch the parrot, just to discard the possibility of her having lost her mind.

Pickwick let her touch him. "I'm real, and I have a message to you."

"A message from whom?"

"From me."

"Ah," she moped her head, feeling dizzy. "What would that be?"

"I can't explain much, but I'm warning you of your husband."

"John?"

"Or Captain Ahab. I'm certainly annoyed by his many names."

"How do you know him? Did you talk to him, too?"

"Doesn't matter. Point is I'm suspicious of him."

"John?" she chuckled, pointing outside where he was collecting wood in this terrible cold. "You're mistaken. He isn't the man he was in the past."

“I’m not talking about the past. I’m talking about now. He hasn’t changed. You should see him on the Seven Seas. He is a ruthless as he’s always been.”

The mother didn’t argue. Her eyelids dropped closed and she took a deep breath. She’d expected to hear this. She’d felt it in her heart, so it wasn’t much of a surprise. “Even so, I only care about he treats his family.”

Pickwick looked outside the window. John’s son and daughter were running into their father’s arms and he playfully lifted them up in the sky. “Can’t argue with that.”

“Then I’d ask you to leave,” she told the parrot. “How do I know you’re not the Devil whispering in my ears?”

Pickwick fluttered his wings, ready to leave, but then his sixth sense itched him like a bad wound. “Listen,” he told her. “Think of who John really is. He is a descendant of Henry VIII who chopped off heads like he was cutting carrots.”

“That’s John fifth generation grandfather,” the mother argued. “A man does not have to follow the same path of his ancestors.”

“But he’s already followed that path,” Pickwick insisted. “All until just a few years ago. The change in his behavior is mind shattering. Purely the stories from a fairy tale.”

“I believe in fairy tales, and in John, and the children.”

“It just can’t be that he is loving his family that way. I swear I’ll pull my feathers if I’m wrong.”

“Then you’d better fly naked from now on. You’ll lose the bet.”

“I have a feeling I won’t. Whoever that man was who changed him, he may have put a spell on your husband.”

“What if?” the mother countered. “I’m good with that. If it’s true, then it was a good man.”

“You’re mistaken,” Pickwick repeated.

“Then what do you think is happening? John is lying about his love for so many years? He is acting? Why would he do that?”

“I have no idea,” Pickwick said. “But I’d say it may have to do with the book he’s been keeping for so long.”

“What book?”

“One Thousand and One Nights. The story about Scheherazade.”

“He burnt that book long ago,” she let out an uncomfortable chuckle. “He considers it a work of evil.”

“No he didn’t,” Pickwick pulled out a few pages from beneath his feathers and showed them to her. The pages were half burned. “He must have changed his mind and picked it up from the fire.”

“So? What does it mean? He just likes the story.”

“The book is about a storyteller girl who evades her king killing her by telling him unfinished stories every night, for many months until he falls in love with her and breaks his own rule of killing the women he married.”

“So?” the mother shrugged her shoulders at this loon parrot. May be it was her who’d lost her mind, imagining the talking bird.

“Can’t you see? The king changed his mind because the girl got him used to her stories for years.”

“I still don’t see what it has to do with John.”

“It’s the idea that if you get used to something for years, you get too attached to it. So much you can’t give up on it.”

“I don’t understand what you’re implying, crazy parrot.” The mother banged a hand on the table. “Are you saying John is acting so that after years we become comfortable and then something happens?”

“Yes,” Pickwick said. “Thirteen years to be exact.”

“Thirteen years?”

“Yes.”

“Thirteen years of what?”

“I don’t know. Could be thirteen years from the day he turned into a good man.”

The mother’s head reeled. She questioned herself. Why was she still listening to this bird? Or did she feel deep inside something was wrong as well? “How do you know it’s thirteen years?”

“John has a knife. He likes to carve with it on the table in his room on the ship. In the last few years he’s only carved one sentence.”

“You’re lying,” she protested.

“I’m a parrot. I don’t lie. I only repeat what others say,” Pickwick said. “Don’t you want to ask what John carved on the table? Do you know he only carves with this knife when he is angry and drunk? Do you want to know what he carved on the back of every wooden door on the ship?”

“Stop it!” She held her head with her hand.

“Do you want to know what he carved on every wine barrel on the ship?” Pickwick was ruthless. “On every corner in the ship? On the palm trees of the islands we stole from?”

“You cruel little bird.” The mother fell to her knees, hands loose beside her. “What did John carve.”

“Once sentence, over and over again,” Pickwick said. “*Thirteen years of snow.*”



On John’s next sail, the mother almost went mad.

All alone in her house, she speculated all kinds of scenarios. What could thirteen years of snow mean to John? Even if it did mean something to him, how would she be sure it had to do with him changing into a better man?

Should she be worried? If so, about what, or whom, exactly?

Part of the terrible parrot's conversation made sense. If John had honestly turned into a better man, why was he still that kind of pirate. If it was to put food on the table, shouldn't he have found an alternative in the many years that had passed?

The mother's mind was reeling. She grew obsessed with her now grown children, so much that she wouldn't let them out of her sight at any moment.

But where would they go? The three of them of them were practically trapped on this island. Even if they decided to cross the snowy hill to the other side where the market and few houses lay, it wasn't safe there.

She watched her son climb the hill with his sister and the buckets of ice they collected. They usually played a game where when they topped the nearest hill they waited to see if the water would melt in the sun that hid behind the greying clouds. Sometimes it worked. Usually it didn't.

"Think," she told herself. "What did John mean by thirteen years of snow?"

One of the assumptions suggested it had nothing to do with the family. Maybe it had to do something with the treasure he was after, or that whale which he could never forgive for taking his leg. Maybe he'd been hunting the whale for thirteen years already — she'd lost count then. Could it be that John had promised himself to give up on hunting the whale after thirteen years?

She stopped to think about that last idea. Maybe John did want to stop chasing the whale. Maybe he wanted to just let go and gave himself thirteen years to end it all.

But why thirteen years?

And why snow?

A long lucid thought led her to believe she could answer the second question about the snow. There was only one place with so much snow. The island where they lived.

It definitely had nothing to do with the sea or the whale. This had to do with them here on the island.

The mother's heart raced. She was terrified.

Frantically, she looked out the window. The children were still safe playing up the hill. The rest of white vastness was meaningless in every way. She could not fathom what John would need from the snow.

An idea shaped in her head, and she found herself dressing and riding the sleigh pulled by an old reindeer up the hill.

"Mother," the girl shouted. "Where you going?"

"To get groceries," she shouted back. "I'll be back before dawn."

Reaching the small town beyond the hill she saw the snow still stretched forever across the land. She halted the sleigh and jumped out, heading for a wise man inside a small shoe shop.

"Mister Geppetto!" she called. "I need your help.

Geppetto was an old shoemaker who was one of the few who secretly sailed from here to Sorrow every once in a while. He was a good man, married to a terrible woman in Sorrow, but he never talked about her much. He loved the silence on the island, and the few residents benefited from him being the only shoemaker in town.

"Catch your breath first," he told her. "How may I help you?"

"You know a lot about this island," she said. "You know about its folklore and history."

"Some of it, yes? What would you want to ask me about?"

"The snow?"

"The snow?" He stopped mending a shoe and listened eagerly.

"Why is it perpetually snowing here?"

Geppetto took a moment, thinking. "It's a cold place, I suppose."

"How come the sun never shines through the clouds?"

“That would be something to ask the birds in the sky, not me.” He chuckled.

“No, I mean,” she tried to collect her thoughts into a meaningful answer. “Do you know anything about the phrase ‘thirteen years of snow’?”

Geppetto was speechless. Apparently he didn’t.

“Do we have some kind of cycle in this island? Does the snow change or stop every thirteen years?”

Geppetto continued being speechless.

“Nothing?”

“I’ve been on and off to the island so I don’t quite remember, dear,” he said. “Shouldn’t you know about this? How many years have you been here?”

“Twelve years,” she said.

“So if something does happen every thirteen years, you haven’t known about it, however silly of an idea it is.”

“It also means I only have a year before my husband comes back, and then I will know.”

“Good for you,” Geppetto muttered, clearly considering her bonkers, like his wife.

“You don’t understand, Geppetto,” she knelt next to him. “I think something horrible is going to happen next year.”

“Something horrible happens every year, dear. You’re just too young to notice.”

“I guess. John has been so good to me and the children in the past years. Nothing bad happened.”

“Well.” He returned to work. “I don’t want to talk about John.”

“Why?”

“I just don’t.”

“Is it because you don’t believe he’s changed?”

“Of course he didn’t change,” he muttered.

If she only had a fistful of salt each time she got into this argument. “How can you say so?” she said. “I saw him help you rebuild the shop last year.”

“He certainly did, but I still don’t believe he’s changed.”

“Why? I can’t understand why no one believes my poor husband.”

“That’s because you look away from the atrocities he still practices at sea. We all know about it.”

The mother stood up, speechless now. This was the one side of the argument she could never win. Again, she wondered if she were too naive believe in her repentant husband.

“I’m sorry I bother you,” she told Geppetto, and walked to the door.

“Wait,” Geppetto said. “You said thirteen years?”

“Yes.” She turned around.

“And you have been hear only twelve?”

“That’s true.”

“And John changed from how long?”

“About seven years ago.”

Geppetto scratched his bald head under a cap. “This doesn’t make sense. I thought the numbers might lead to a clue.”

“Never mind.”

“But before you leave, I have a suggestion,” Geppetto said. “Not that it has any evidence to it. I am just consulting the shoe in my old man’s head.”

“Speak out, please. I need all the help I can get.”

“What if John changed for a reason?”

“What kind of reason?”

“Something that doesn’t really have to do anything with him being a good man.”

“Like what?”

“Like what if the man who visited him that day wasn’t some kind of angel putting him on a path of righteousness as you thought.”

She said nothing. It was a small town. Everyone knew about the man who visited John, but strangely none of them saw him.

“What if the man was someone of greater evil than John?”

“I thought about it,” she said. “But could never imagine why.”

“A man of greater evil might have brought bad news with him,” Geppetto said. “Pirates always do that.”

“Pirates always do what?”

“Pirates always send a mean pirate to tell another pirate that his blood would be spilled.”

The mother wanted to make a sound, but no words came out of her mouth. Geppetto’s assumption was plausible. So many times John had told her about some sort of law between pirates. They only killed each other with prior notice, whether be it punishment or something else.

“If so, then the stranger must have given John the warning,” she suggested.

“A black spot on a white paper,” Geppetto nodded. “That’s what pirates do, usually. But what if there was no paper. John is a feared pirate. They would not use the same law on him. Someone of higher rank in the pirate world, like the man who visited him, comes and tells him about him being executed, so John realizes he has a few years left, so he…”

“…decides to be a loving father and husband for the time left in his calculated life,” the mother followed. Even so, she’d still respected John for what he did. “Are you saying they gave him thirteen years from the day the man visited us?”

“That wouldn’t be correct, young woman,” Geppetto said. “Because they’re not just thirteen years, but thirteen years of *snow*.”

Now it made sense. Though Geppetto’s speculation was more of a hunch than anything, she realized what snow meant. It simply attached the timing to the day he arrived on the island.

“You mean thirteen years from when he married me on this island?” she asked, already expecting the answer.

Geppetto nodded. “John is in pain, though I still don’t like him. His transformation is based on the realization that he has none of the world on his side, but you and the children.”

“And he wanted to make the best of the years left in his life,” she mumbled.

Slowly, a single tear trickled down her cheek.

“Why are you crying, young woman? You should be proud of him — though I’ll be really happy when he dies.” Geppetto muttered the last sentence as low as possible.

“I’m crying because if you’re right, I’m never going to see John again.” She wiped the single tear away. “Last time he left, he said he’ll be back in a year.”

Geppetto understood. “My condolences, young woman, because that would be thirteen years of snow already.”



The months that followed was the hardest on the mother. She spent her days in a haze, limiting to her stay in her house among the children, and waiting for John to come back — if ever came back.

She counted the days, marked them with a sharp stone on the wall and prayed for a merciful fate for John.

And even though Geppetto’s theory was full of assumptions, she could not resort to another explanation. The man she’d come to love, the man

who'd changed his life, the man who'd decided to spend the last years of his life good to his family, was about to die.

It baffled her how much she was in love with him now, when she'd hated him so much she could have killed him years before. But in these last years, what more could a woman have asked than a husband who cared deeply for his family.

Not only did she feel that way, but her daughter and son missed him so much, and two days were the most intolerable for them: when both of them stuck another carrot into the snowman. The girl had turned twelve, and the boy had turned ten. They missed him so much.

The day when her count on the wall showed her a year had passed, she sat with her children by the fire, anticipating John. In the mother's mind it was a simple equation. If her husband didn't show up today, then Geppetto was right, and the pirates had taken his life. It would have made sense that John had never told her. He wouldn't want her to worry, and would have preferred the news delivered to her by one the pirates. They always did that. In those times, many women learned about their deceased husbands in war or at sea or to famines and diseases months later. It was just the norm. Some women had to wait years before someone knocked on their door and delivered the bad news.

She hoped she wouldn't be one of them.

Evening dawned and crows crowed in the distance outside the house, but John had not arrived.

"Where is father?" asked the boy.

The mother held her tears and swallowed her pain. The boy's concern showed her how much he loved the man who was not really his father, the man who had a heart big enough to raise a child that wasn't his, so much that you'd think he was his flesh and blood.

She could only hug her children and send them to bed, telling them that she'd miscalculated the days. That a year had not passed yet. That they still had to wait a month more. She lied to them, but it was a conventional lie.

Living isolated in a snowy island, far off from the world, time will steal your youth and you'd never even notice it.

Alone on the front porch of the house, she stood watching the white of snow, now glittering an ominous grey against the middle of the night. In the distance, she could see nothing else. No one was coming back.

She raised her head to the stars and remembered what she'd been told as a child. That stars weren't stars, but wishes, waiting for you to grab hold of one and make a dream come true. Though she had a past of her own and wouldn't want to remember it now, she still remembered the other children, tiptoeing and try to catch a wish.

Someone had told them in childhood that you can have only one wish granted, so you had to make it count. All you had to do was sing *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* when you were asleep. A song she could not fully remember, but did the best she could because it was time to ask for her one wish.

Pleas, stars up in the sky, make John come back. Make him survive the thirteen years of snow.

Then she fell asleep.

In her dreams the parrot showed up again. This time more insistent than ever.

"Why are you still wishing he'll come back?" it said. "You should have prayed he'd die. You have no idea what is about to happen. Something terrible. Something terrible."

A hand on her shoulder interrupted the dream and woke her up. Slowly, she fought through the blurriness of her eyes. A silhouette of a man stood above her.

"You shouldn't have waited outside," the voice said.

The mirth she felt inside was so overwhelming she fainted. It was a good faint because the man was Long John Silver.



For almost another year, a passerby would mistake the little house in the middle of the snow for being a part cut from heaven. The four members inside always laughed, always cheered, and always slept exhausted from the amount of happiness they've experienced.

John had been hurt on the sea, but not much. He didn't like to talk about it, so he wouldn't answer her when she asked him why he carved the phrase thirteen years of snow on his ship. The mother should have been wary again, because John never bothered to ask her how she knew. Instead, he asked what she'd promised him years ago.

"How much do you love your children?"

"Why ask?" she said. "I could tell you how much I love myself, or you, but never how much I love my children. You know why?"

"Why? I'm curious." He seemed to listen to that part more than anything.

"Because I love them so much there is no way I can measure it or explain it in words."

John smiled and tapped her on the shoulder. "You're a good woman. That's all I needed to hear."

"Now it's my turn to ask you again," she said. "Are you going to die soon and leave us? Is that what it's all about?"

John said nothing and walked out to play with the children.



That night she had to prepare for her daughter's birthday the next morning. There was a lot to do. None of the few residents of the island had ever celebrated birthdays. They'd never heard of them. It was a custom that John had heard of while traveling. The children liked it. It made them feel special and optimistic about growing older.

As everyone was sleeping, she cooked and cleaned the house and adorned it with colorful cloths John had bought from faraway lands. They were the finest of silks, probably Persian, a land he'd often spoke about. So

lovely she couldn't wait for the look on her daughter's eyes when she saw her mother had made her a dress out of it.

Brushing the silk against her cheek, a darker thought shone in the back of her head. John didn't buy this, you know it. He must have stolen it. That's what he does when he's on the Seven Seas.

How she wished she could just rid herself of those morbid thoughts.

But you can't. It's time to face the truth. John is a pirate. He may not only have stolen this beautiful silk, but killed for it.

She dropped the silk, imaginary red blood coloring her vision.

See? You can't escape it. Whoever he is pretending to be, he is not who pretends. At least not wholly.

Prayer was her only way out of her dilemma. She prayed for an hour or so, trying to clear her head. She asked God to help her make up her mind, once and for all. Either she trusted John or she didn't.

Her heart took over and she decided she did not care what her pirate husband did outside the island. A selfish feeling, but one that kept her sane. She only cared about the man's love for his children, bearing in mind that one of them wasn't his.

We all have sins of our own. Let's not let the past grey the future of our beloved children, those we've given birth to and those we haven't.

A serene wave of feeling ran through her body as she picked up the silk dress again and continued preparation for her daughter's birthday tomorrow. The food had come out excellent. She'd finished cleaning the house. The presents had been readied.

Outside, dawn had settled and the soon-to-come twilight glistened off the snow outside the window. She wished it'd be a warmer day so her daughter would enjoy playing outside. Speaking of outside, the mother realized she'd forgotten something. A most important thing that her daughter would anticipate doing, now that her father was back.

The snowman.

Hurriedly, she put on her cloak and trudged outside in the thick snow with a carrot in her hand. She wouldn't place in the snowman, but prepare it in a small basket and cover it with a blanket. It had to be ready so her daughter would celebrate by sticking it into the snowman, next to her twelve other carrots marking her years.

It suddenly dawned on the mother, and fear chilled slowly up her spine. This wasn't a chill of cold, but of horror. Again.

Twelve carrots? Twelve years? Today her daughter would turn thirteen. Her daughter who'd spent every day of her life on the island. Here in the snow.

Was that what John had meant with thirteen years of snow?

Sinking to her knees and dropping the basket, she stared quizzically at the snowman. That rigid dead piece of hardened snow must have known the secret.

"Speak up!" She was losing her mind. "What are you going to do to my daughter?"

But the snowman was as dead as snow was. He'd not even moved the carrot he had for a nose. Just his blunt smile plastered at his face staring back at her.

With that smile a reel of memories attacked her…

The snowman was John's idea. The carrots were John's idea. The counting of the years was John's idea. Even when their daughter had pointed out she was four years old when John first built the snowman, he'd insisted on sticking four carrots in it. He was simply counting the years.

"So what?" she reasoned with herself. "He is just a father celebrating his children's year. So what?"

You know what. Think of the past, before John turned good. He would not speak to his daughter. He hated her. She cried for nights because of him. His change must be part of a plan.

"What plan?" It was exhausting talking to herself, but it was a mother's brain, one that had to calculate all the odds to protect her children.

Whatever plan it is, it's going to happen today, when your daughter is thirteen years old.

"This can't be," she tried to shush her overworking brain. "This just can't be."

Let's see it that way. You may be overthinking it. You may be the one who is insane. And evil. But what if you're right? What if?

It was then when the mother realized what she had to do. She ran back home, descended to the abandoned basement, fetched left and right for something. It was a rusty wooden thing that needed fixing. Fast. A rifle.

She made sure she had ammunition, because if John, or anyone else, will ever think of hurting her daughter today, she'd kill him in cold blood.



When the girl and boy woke up they spent most of the day with their father. The mother watched from behind the window, the rifle hidden underneath her thick winter dress.

No matter how many times the children asked her to come out, she refused, pretending she had more cooking to do. She watched them play in the snow. She watched them stick the thirteenth carrot into the snowman. She watched them happier than ever, thinking she is just mad and didn't deserve to be a mother.

What do you have in mind, John? Did the pirates shame you for having a daughter? Are you like all those inhuman fathers we hear about, those who bury their daughter's alive to rid themselves of the sin of giving birth to a girl? What's on your mind.

…To my knowledge, as the Keeper of Books, the mother's thoughts, though dark and morbid, hadn't been far from the truth. In my studies I've come across ancient tribes across the world who buried their infant daughters because they thought they'd bring them shame? A historical fact no one wants to talk about.

But let’s continue the mother’s story…

The twilight turned into noon, and then to afternoon, then twilight again. The day was fading away, giving way to darkness, and still John hadn’t hurt his children.

The mother was seriously losing her mind.

Thirteen years of snow, she thought. Her mind reeled so far she thought of the man she’d bedded when John had gone sailing years ago. Could it be he knew John? Could they both have conspired against her and were going to hurt children?

“Nonsense.” She broke a plate by throwing it against the wall. “How would that be possible? It’s all in my mind. All in my mind.”

She ran to the backyard to clean her wounds with the water from the well, still thinking, still investigating.

“I think I should leave this house,” she told herself. “I have to ask John permission to leave for a year like he does or I will go crazy, and probably pass the madness onto them. I’m beginning to believe there’s never been a parrot. It was just my imagination. That of a lonely woman in the middle of the snow, burdened by the weight of raising two children on her own most of these years.”

The idea made sense to her. She should confess her inner struggle to John. If he was really the man she trusted now, he would understand. He’d said he wouldn’t go back to the sea before another year. She could use a break, visit her family, escape this terrible white snow everywhere.

Thirteen years? Why thirteen years?

Her mind wouldn’t shut up. But it was a plausible question. Whatever was going to happen, why thirteen years? What was the significance of this number? Her son used to say he’d read that thirteen was an evil number, bad luck. He’d even read that some people feared the number thirteen, whatever kind of books her son was reading.

To the mother, she'd never had problems with the number, nor had she heard stories about it when she was a child. Her mother used to tell her all sorts of folk tales though. Why thirteen years of snow?

Taking a deep breath, she realized that this was the key to her answer. If she knew the significance of the number, she'd solve the puzzle.

She collected herself, went outside, hid the rifle, played with her kids and buried the question in the back of her head. The night passed like a cool breath, and in the morning John told her he'd be traveling again. She didn't mind. She didn't feel like she would miss him much, though he'd done nothing wrong. His only sin was that his presence was driving her mad.

She kissed him on the forehead and wished him luck with his travels, prayed for him to find the boy named Peter Pan, who'd lead him to the treasure he'd been after for years, and that he'd find the whale who took his leg.

John made her promise him again to love the children and limped away in the snow. She'd not see him before another two years.



John's time at sea slipped by as fast as sand through an hourglass. More killing, drinking, hunting, and chasing Neverland.

But it was all in vain. He'd accomplished nothing.

At the end of the first year, when his men asked to return home, he shocked them with extending the sail for another year.

"If you don't like it, jump off the ship before I slit your throat with my knife," he warned them.

The soldiers stared silently at his knife. It was the same one he used to carve his cryptic words *Thirteen Years of Snow*.

"Why snow?" asked a sailor, one night while they drank under a full moon. "I mean we're in the middle of the sea. There is no snow here?"

“Who said it was about here?” John grunted, too tipsy to hold back the secrets he kept in his heart.

“Then where is it? Are you telling me Treasure Island is a snowy place?”

“What made you think it’s Treasure Island?”

“It’s all we think about. Either Treasure Island or Moby Dick.”

“Why do you think I’m after Moby Dick?” John was curious.

“To take revenge.”

John nodded agreeably. “And what kind of man hunts a whale in such an endless sea for so many years?”

“A man of dedication.”

“Dedication to what?”

“Again, revenge.”

“So you understand that, though I’m ruthless and hardly tolerant of others who stand in my way, I’m also patient in my own way.”

“Incredibly patient, I’d say.”

John gulped from his bottle and neared the soldier, then stared right into his eyes. “Why do you think I’m so patient?”

The soldier shrugged. “You don’t give up.”

“Argh,” John swayed his bottle sideways. “Don’t shit me, pirate. Not giving up is for fairy tale stories you tell little children so they grow up thinking this is a fair world we live in.”

“Then what keeps you so patient, Captain?”

“I want you to tell me,” John challenged his sailor. “Think deeper. Think about me. Think about who I am.”

“You’re the greatest man on the seas.”

“I said don’t shit me, sailor.” Furious, John broke the bottle onto the ship floor. “Tell it to my face. Tell me what kind of man I am.”

The soldier looked down, regretful he'd opened up the subject.

"Tell me!" John roared.

"I'm afraid if I tell you to your face, you'd kill me, Captain," the sailor said.

"I will kill you anyway," John stepped closer. "At least you'd have spat it out of your chest before you die."

The sailor began shivering.

"Tell me!"

"All right. You're the cruelest, maniacal, and unjust bastard I've ever met. I've never seen such evil like you. I've never seen a pirate kill so many men without blinking. I think you've got no heart. I think you're a beast. A straight descendant of apes."

"What else?" John smirked and stepped closer, a few inches from the sailor's face.

"I've heard stories about you."

"What stories?"

"You're either a descendant of King Henry VIII or Bluebeard himself, men who raped and killed their wives for pleasure."

"What else?" John pressed, his voice louder, every other sailor on the ship surrounding them now, watching the situation unfold.

"I heard that it's like a curse, descending from generation to generation in your family. That not one male descendant has ever treated his many wives in a better way."

"What else?"

"That some of you even killed their own son and daughters."

"What else!" A lightning strike in the sky.

"That you enjoy revenge like men enjoy their children. That you'd wait for years and years to live for the moment when you can crush your

enemies. You'd wait years and years, just to look in their eyes and indulge in that look of defeat."

One last step closer now, John asked. "And what do you see in my eyes, sailor?"

The sailor, knowing those were his last words, took his time to answer. He wanted to say the right words. He wanted to see Long John Silver in pain, because he knew how words can hurt. He said, "I see a weak man, pretending he is cruel and ruthless, only to hide the pain of waiting so long to take his revenge."

John let out a sigh, and instead of raising his voice again, he calmed down, his shoulders eased with defeat. The other sailors were speechless, realizing the poor sailor was right. Long John Silver, a terrible man, was in so much pain, disguised behind his tough demeanor.

"Is he talking about Moby Dick?" one of the sailors asked John. "Are you feeling defeated because you've never caught Moby Dick."

"No, that's not it," John said feebly, swaying a little to his drunkenness.

"Then it must be the fact that we failed in finding the island were Jim Hawkins lived," another sailor suggested.

John said nothing. His body off balance, swaying with the tides of the sea, his hands loose, and his beard smeared with bear grease. He'd lowered his head so much that his chin touched his chest, like a man with no purpose.

"Thirteen years of snow," he mumbled.

Then one sailor realized something and stepped out of the shadows, nearer to John. "I think I may have an idea about what it means," he told the others. "I think I now understand."

"What do you understand?" the sailors inquired.

"I think he is talking about the boy, Jim Hawkins."

"How is that possible?"

“I’m not exactly sure, but I think the island where the boy lives is full of snow.”

“So?” the sailors scoffed.

“That’s why we can’t see it with all the ice and snowy places we come across,” the sailor said. “The island is protected by some magic that makes it hide beneath the snow.”

“For thirteen years?”

“To my knowledge,” the sailor said. “If we catch Jim Hawkins this year, the boy who’ll lead us to the treasure will be thirteen-years-old.”



Again, as Keeper of the keys, I’d advise you stop here — though I doubt you will. What’s coming is unimaginable, not that it’s violent or drenched in blood. But what’s coming is the sort of evil I have never seen. The sort of evil that doesn’t make evil a point of view like I’ve always believed. It shows some kind of evil that is made of pure darkness. You’d be naive if you thought such people don’t exist. I know I was.

Prior to this diary, I’d always believed that evil was mostly a reckless decision made under the short-thinking and reasoning at a certain moment. For example, you accidentally step on a man’s foot, he thinks you meant it, he gets mad, and kills you. That’s not what’s coming. This this the kind of evil were the person committing it slept every night of his life, for so many years, planning and dreaming of this moment. So conscious and aware of what he is about to do.

This is the kind of evil where the evil man had years on hand to change his mind. He could wake up one day and stare at a beautiful flock of birds in the sky, wondering why he would still want to commit this evil. Every minute of those years, he, or she, had the chance to change their heart and let go, but they didn’t.

This is evil as black as crows dipped in black seas of oil under a veil of a blackened sky that had been born to sunless god.

Here it goes…

Two years away from her husband, watching her children grow into amazing young people, the mother had given up on her suspicions about John. Now she anticipated his return so much.

Though it was the same day her son was turning thirteen years of age, she didn't want to relive the horror and doubt all over again, because she'd always been wrong. In fact, she believed this will be the best memory of the number thirteen in her life.

Last night, she'd asked God for a sign, just a small one, to make her feel safer and on the right path.

It came this morning, sooner than she'd ever thought. The sun shone through the grey clouds, piercing through every grim darkness hovering above. Even the snowman was going to melt to her light of hope today.

"Mother," her son chirped outside. "Did you see the sun. It's beautiful!"

"So beautiful, Jack." She chuckled.

"I can't wait for father to come and enjoy it with us," her daughter followed.

"I missed him so much, Jill."

She watched them climb up their favorite hill, wondering how long it would stand the scorching sun outside. Would the snow really melt to this lovely sun? Maybe the thirteen years of snow were a sign of optimism. Thirteen years after her Jack had been born, the sun would melt this evil expanse of white all around them.

She could even see a rainbow in the distance. It bowed from side to side. But with the other side, she saw men in the distance, trudging in the snow, closer to the house.

A mother's senses are never wrong. If she'd questioned the looming menace around her children all of her life, this time she didn't. She was sure. Those men had come to bring pain.

She hardly breathed, squinting, wanting to get a closer look. What were those men doing here? Where was John?

She hurried out of the house, her rifle on her side, aiming at them, protecting herself.

Only to realize they weren't coming for her.

They'd come for the children.

Jack and Jill had rolled in their playful silliness down the hill, and she wished she could ask them to climb it up again and escape.

But her voice wouldn't come out. Only flickers of images in her mind, trying to connect what was really happening for the last thirteen years.

"Look!" Jack pointed at the men, running toward them. "Mother, we have visitors."

She wanted to scream. *Stay away, Jack. I can feel it. They're here to harm you.* But her voice still wouldn't come out. Deep in her mind, she thought she had realized what had been going on all along, but didn't want to admit it.

"I'm coming after you, Jack," Jill chirped.

Closer, the mother wondered why those men were so short and stocky. Short evil men approaching?

Then an ominous voice whispered in her ear. It was John. The one she'd known from the past. The dark one who hurt her too many nights.

"How do you feel now?" he asked.

"What's going on?" She dropped the rifle, her body shivering.

"What should have happened thirteen years ago." John's eerie words made her shudder and freeze, she could hardly move.

"What should have happened thirteen years ago?"

"I should have punished you," John said. "I should have punished you bad for being with another man and giving me a child who wasn't mine."

“But you said you’ve changed. I saw how you were with the children. You loved them. They loved you.”

“What can I say?” he said with a smug look on his face. “Other than a brilliant cook and cruel pirate, I’m a good actor.”

She felt an invisible wind plaster her against the walls of the porch. She fought not to fall down. “You can’t be serious.”

“I’ve never been more serious,” John said. “When you betrayed me, I told myself just kill the whore you had for a wife. I told myself bury the children like every man you’ve robbed and killed.” He shook his shoulders with disdain. “But I realized it wouldn’t have satisfied me. You’ve dug a hole into my essence, one that left me with a blackened void. You didn’t give me a son. You cheated on me. And you embarrassed me in front of my pirates. Whatever I did to you then would not have quenched my thirst for revenge nearly enough.

The mother blinked, trying to comprehend how this kind of evil ever existed on the face of the Earth. She let out a shriek, connecting a few more dots. “The man outside the house. He gave you this idea.”

John laughed, smirking. “The Piper himself. He chose me to work for him, and showed me what evil really was.”

“He advised you to fake being a good father for so long?” She still couldn’t get it. “How did you even live with yourself.”

“Playing a good father wasn’t really bad,” John said. “But you know why I tolerated it?”

“Why?”

“Because the more I played, the more you fell in love with idea of a happy family, fell in love with your children.”

“That’s why you always reminded me to love them? I never understood why.”

“Why? You asking me why?” The veins on his neck protruded.

“Yes, why? Why would you wait so long for revenge?”

“Two reasons.” He violently held her face in his hands and stared at her. “To see this kind of terror in your eyes.”

“What?”

“Imagine I’d just avenged myself back then. Imagine I had killed you back then. None of that was satisfactory, but this, the pain I see in your eyes, this is beautiful.”

“You’re a horrible man.” Her words could not describe what she wanted to say. Was there a darker word than horrible?”

“Patience my dear, it’s my strongest sin,” he said. “I waited for you the way I waited for the whale. And how beautiful it is. Such a moment of so much joy to me, to see you in so much pain, betrayed, fooled beyond imagination, crying yourself to death, just like you did to me when you gave me a son that wasn’t mine.”

“Forget about me.” She tried to free herself from his grip but couldn’t. “What will happen to the children?”

“You mean your son?” He let go of her, laughing in loud staccatos. “The one who was never my son?”

“What will you do to him?” She pounded his chest but was too weak now.

John turned around and pointed at the approaching men. She could see they had captured both her children. And to her horror, she now realized why they’d looked so short from the distance.

They weren’t men. They were Goblins.

“Oh my God!” she shrieked.

“Yes?” John made fun of her. “Are you talking to me? Because I’m the only one making rules now.”

“You’re taking them to the Goblin Market in Sorrow.” She sank to her knees. “You’re going to sell your own children?”

“Not for money, dear.” John pulled her face up and looked into her teary eyes. “But for this look in your eyes. I’m not even going to kill you. That’d

be merciful to you."

Silence crept all over the snow, and the sun, which had promised a brighter future pulled back into some dark cavern up in the sky, ashamed and embarrassed at how evil some humans were. A grey shade hovered all over the island.

"Please don't sell my children. Please take me." She bent down to kiss John's feet.

He pushed her away so hard she fell on her side, sobbing herself to death in the snow.

"I'll will enjoy your pain for the rest of your life, trying to find them," John said. "I will enjoy you suffering everyday looking for them, wondering what happened to them. If they're alive or dead. If they've been hurt and whom they've been sold to."

"Please no," she cried.

"I will make sure you they are sold for cheap," he said. "So they'll end up in the worst and dirtiest hands of buyers. At such a young age, terrible things will happen to them."

"Please. Please. Please." She could not do anything but plead and beg, though she knew it was all in vain. Such evil as John's was beyond her, and she didn't know what to do.

She watched the Goblins take them away, though Jack looked like he was planning to escape. She saw him nod at his sister, then toward the hill. The mother wondered if he'd make it. She wished he could.

"I'll leave you to rot here, dear wife," John told her and followed the Goblins.

"Wait!" She held out a hand. "Wait."

"What now?" John scoffed without looking back. "I will not change my mind. I'm enjoying this too much.

"Why thirteen years?" she asked. "Why did you have to wait thirteen years?"

“Oh, that?” John roared with laughter again. “This I will not answer, but one of those ugly midgets might.” John permitted them to talk and the mother impatiently wanted to hear the answer.

An ugly goblin trotted back to her and said with the dirties grin on his miserable face, “We don’t sell kids in the Goblin Market until they’re thirteen-years-old.”

“What?” She was shocked. “Why? Because buyers wouldn’t be interested in slaves under thirteen-years-old.”

“No, mam,” the Goblin mocked her. “Because we have standards.”

End of Diary

MY NOTES

Written by the Beast

Thirteen Years of Snow is the darkest prequel I've read so far. I've mentioned before how Captain Ahab sends shivers down my spine. Now I understand why.

I'm glad it ended with such a farce comment from the Goblins, 'We have standards!'

It eased up the tension a bit.

I am still unable to fully comprehend the story. Does revenge really live with you that long? Is it worth it?

I was also surprised that Hans Christian Andersen had written about this tale before. It's a short tale called *The Snow Child*. One which is always dismissed and overlooked in favor of a better-known Russian fairy tale by the same name. Or maybe every other author stirred away from the dark themes it conveyed…

And little did I know that slavery started at thirteen-years-old. I'm not sure if it's a fact. I feel for Jack and his sister and want to know more about them.

For now, on to the next prequel.



Grimm Prequel #23

Sun, Moon, & Sorrow

as told by Lady Shallot

Dear diary,

I am a woman made of the thin threads that are the fabric of an almost transparent soul. Weak and single threads, you might think. But you're wrong. Never underestimate the power of a thread that binds. A million threads are in me, strong enough to wrap around your sword of vengeance and hold you forever in place.

My threads can weave suns. Can weave moons. Trees and hills, and with a little magic, the tides of a river. Slowly but surely, staring at my mirror, I can build a world. Even a life sometimes.

You'd come to me, wishing for a new place; one where you could build your dreams or escape your past. You'd come and visit me in my highest of towers; climbing up it for seven days and nights, and when you found me, you'd understand that there is almost nothing I can't create.

As long as I have my supply of the red fleece I use with my magic.

It'd be nice story if I could tell you of the origins of the fleece, but it will expose my secrets.

Still, with all my magic, you'd sense my loneliness; trapped in the room at the top of a tower, accompanied by my only friend: my reflection in the mirror.

You'd ask yourself why I'm like that. How can it be, despite possessing God-like powers, that I've not created a better universe for myself.

I'd say it's not an easy question to answer. It's hard to point out where in my life I ended up this way. I've lived a terribly long time.

But here is a story you may like. A story I decided to write while bored of creating suns and moons. A story I remembered when holding the red ball

of thread in my hand.

I think I was seven when it started…

As a child, I lived on Astolat, an isolated island, one of many in the Seven Seas. On the back of a whale, of course. Except legend had it that our whale had died long ago, floating upon the sea with nowhere to go.

The few islanders, a little more than three hundred I believed, were partially thankful for the dead whale. It meant we'd never flip over one day.

But it also meant we in Astolat had no purpose to live for.

You see, each whale was supposed to flip over or guide the islanders to their destiny at some point in life. With a dead whale, we were doomed without a fate, without a hope, bound for the unknown, and so our lives were bland.

I lived with my mother in a high castle, the only one on the island, called Camelot. Some will tell you Camelot doesn't exist, that it's a fictional Castle that only served as a setting in 18th century romance novels.

They're wrong.

It'd be fair to describe my childhood as happy. Unlike other kids, the sense of doom didn't stain my soul. Most probably because I loved to sing.

Not only sing. I loved to tell stories.

And not just that. I loved to write. A lot.

With a sharpened stone from the shore, I'd write and scribble on the walls of the castle all day long. What did I write? I think I was too young to know. But it was my imagination spilled out to the world.

I loved it.

You may ask why I used a stone, and your inquiry is sound. I had a reason to write with a stone on the wall. In fact, doing this was breaking the law in Astolat.

You see, writing was prohibited on our island. Storytelling too, but writing was the big issue. Recently they had burned all books and thrown

the ashes into the sea. Any writing tool was considered a weapon, so much so that some of those who broke the rules were hanged.

Why?

I'm not really sure, not until this day writing this diary. Some said it being a fate-less island with a dead whale meant that we shouldn't learn and expand our minds — because the act would urge us to leave the island.

The islanders thought we were destined to die. A fate we had been given by the Gods. We had to respect and accept it. Basically, they were sentencing us all to die while still being alive.

The other theory I heard was almost the same. With a twist.

Astolat had always been surrounded with that thing we called The Between. A strange phenomenon where you'd wake up one day and look outside your window and see the sea had frozen, which meant you were able to walk over to the nearest island.

The Between had always proven to be a lie. No one ever came back. And then for thirteen years we'd keep listening to their screams at night.

Writing opened up minds and urged a person to explore, which basically meant to leave the island. The elders of Astolat feared for our few inhabitants — and frankly, some of us were terrified by the night screams; there was no point in adding more.

And this is how I ended up living in a world where the written word was prohibited.

But what was a curious little girl like me supposed to do?

Those words and images wanted to splash out of my mind. They wanted to express themselves. They wanted me to enjoy the beauty of words, and the astonishment of putting them side by side, like bricks building the highest of castles in the skies.

Slowly. Bit by Bit. My childhood was darkening like all the other children.

Days bored me to death and nights drove me crazy, because I kept dreaming about words. The best times were when I spent some hours alone by the shore. There, in the cold weather, staring at the illusion called The Between, I discovered a secret way to write and never get caught.

The mist.

First, I used to breath letters into the cold. Twitching and curling my lips and mouth, straining my neck, to produce a letter ‘o.’ Then ‘i’ which was the easiest. ‘X’ was another one that didn’t take much time. But then it was getting harder and harder to do.

So I delved into the darker spots of the mist, places my mother had warned me from venturing, and instead of breathing letters, I’d shape them with my finger through the thick mist.

After three weeks, the first word I’d completed was ‘Elaine’. My real name. Elaine of Astolat, later known as Lady Shallot of the Tower of Tales.

But the mist didn’t hold. It would shift and wave and soon, I’d lose my writing.

Another loss in my quest for releasing my imagination.

I remember feeling defeated. Going back home that night, I slumped on my bed and ended up dreaming of letters for another two years.

Letters that shaped my imagination, my inner world, the things I needed to express. The things I was destined to create.

Until my ninth birthday…

We woke up in the middle of the night to another screaming voice. A new one.

Sweating, I awoke in my bed, clamping my hands on my ears and squeezing my eyes shut. Never had the screaming bothered me like that. I mean, it wasn’t a new thing that someone decided to leave the island and cross The Between.

Except that this screaming voice was unlike anyone else. It was my mother’s.



I mourned my mother for seven years, unable to grow, to meet people, or live an adolescent life. I locked myself up in Camelot, cooked for myself, washed my few clothes, and shut myself from the world.

My mother had been my everything, and there was simply nothing left to live for. The curse that had been bestowed upon Astolat had finally crept up my bones. I was just another islander destined to wither away.

Sluggishness painted my soul by day, insomnia (we hadn't discovered that word then, but I lived long enough to learn) by night. It was my mother's screams that awoke me at night. So disturbing, so personal. I believed she sometimes talked me.

"Don't do it, Elaine," she'd whisper. "Don't cross The Between. Ever."

It was as if she had read my mind, and I had no idea what to do. Every day I stared at the expanse of ice entirely surrounding our isolated island and wondered: could it possibly be an illusion? What kind of magic could do this? And if so, why did my mother scream? Was she stuck in The Between? Did she drown in the water that was actually The Between?

At sixteen, it was hard to make up my mind. If I decided to cross The Between, would I be looking for my mother or my freedom from the island?

It's important that I mention we hadn't the slightest notion about the world outside. Only those who've read books knew. The rest of us lived a less than ordinary peasant life on an island where we couldn't even fish, afraid of The Between — we survived by farming and raising livestock; we took great care of them, almost worshiped them, because if they'd ever gone extinct, so would we.

I had also spent those seven years inspecting my mother's obsession with rugs, knitting, and straw. We had all kinds of them. Threads everywhere, though I was oblivious as to where she'd gotten them.

Red threads were her most beloved.

In her life she had sold beautiful rugs to the peasants. She'd woven clothes, hats, and other garments. Everything thread. She was a master at it. I never loved the threads, but they put food on the table.

The castle of Camelot itself was useless. It was a castle, but ancient and full of rats. I lived with my mother in a couple of rooms up in the tower to stay away from them. I'd spend hours staring at The Between from above. It seemed to never end — and stared back at me.

"Why are we living in a castle, mother?" I had asked her once.

"We inherited it."

"From whom?"

"You'll understand when you grow up."

"Why is it so old, mother?"

"It's pretty old. Older than I'd like to think."

"What does that mean?"

"It's older than the years themselves."

I scratched my head.

"You see this castle holds the secret to the universe," she said.

I was seven, so this was too much to comprehend, but it had my imagination sparkling. I loved that. It was the reason why I loved letters later.

But I had one more question.

"If it holds such a big secret, why are we destined to die on the back of this dead whale? I'm confused."

My mother's face dimmed, she stopped knitting, resting the red fleece at her side and pulling me up on her lap. "Because a dark man, a really evil man wants it," she explained. "And I'd rather die with the secret than hand it to him."

Remembering this conversation at the age of sixteen, I sat on the window's edge, staring at The Between. The wind swirled my hair that day, I almost lost my balance and risked the fall from the tower, down into a pool of rats on the ground. Rain began to trickle as I began to understand what The Between was all about.

And just before I uttered the words to myself, I heard the voice. His voice. Not the screams of the islanders who'd crossed over, but the dark man my mother had warned me of.

"Elaine," his voice seeped like poison into a sick body. "Cross over, Elaine."

I stumbled back, fell on the floor and gripped to a pole nearby. Never had I been so scared. The rain fell heavier, thankfully distorting his call.

"Oh, my!" I banged my forehead on the pole "That's why the islanders had been crossing over. "It wasn't a choice or their curiosity. It was him. The dark man called for them."

Standing up, I made sure I'd never forget that day. The day I understood The Between was there to save us from him. Because on the other side of The Between, he thought it was all ice and thus, could never find us — or the castle.



Day and night, I searched the castle. I tolerated the nasty rats and insects, as well as the endless tunnels where I risked getting lost forever. I discovered rooms, fully furnished and never touched. Hallways that suggested parties and events had occurred here. But none of them made sense. None of them had pictures or showed what year they were from.

But I couldn't discover all of it, and when I was out of breadcrumbs, I used to tag my way back to the tower.

I spent my nights drawing maps of the castle. This place here, that place there. This tunnel leads to this chamber, which has a secret corridor that leads to the spiral stairs. What *was* this? This castle was a maze.

And at night, I'd sit knitting like my mother, learning the craft. If she'd known such a secret, could it be that knitting wasn't coincidental? Not just a mere attempt to put food on the table?

I had to learn, stupidly warping an accidental weaving of threads. Tipping it all over, winding it in my hands, and producing the worst of rugs.

"Damn it!" I'd scream at my art. "What is the point of all this? I hate these threads!"

Then one day, resting on a rock outside the castle, I drew more of the map. Whatever I did, the drawings seemed disjointed, as if the things I'd seen never existed. There was no logical way to connect the rooms, thus I couldn't estimate the greatness of the castle. I couldn't find the secret it was holding.

So I took a walk around the outside of the castle.

And there it happened. One detail that suggested the madness of it all.

Walking next to the window of an abandoned kitchen in the ground floor, I counted twenty-one strides, the length of the kitchen's outer wall. Considering the castle was built of heavy and thick bricks, it meant the inner space of the kitchen couldn't exceed that. Normally, the length of the kitchen wall from inside would be a little less than the twenty-one steps outside.

It wasn't.

I shrieked and ran around the castle, entered from the main door, and hurtled toward the kitchen and calculated the length of the wall inside.

Oh, my. Twenty-seven steps.

How could a room be larger on the inside than its dimensions outside?

A shiver crept up my back and I had to run up to the tower and hide there for several days.

I was so scared to descend again, thinking that if I did, I'd lose my mind. This was too much, and without my mother I had no idea what was going

on. I hugged my lonely self in a corner in the tower and pretended the dark man's calling across The Between was a figment of my imagination.

For three days, I couldn't move. All I did was thread in front of the mirror my mother loved so much. I thought that imitating her every move would lead to a conclusion.

This time it did.

Placing the mirror to face the window behind me, then facing the mirror myself, I could see The Between reflected in the mirror — later I learned this was one of the first mirrors ever made in the world.

But The Between looked different from here. The mirror had the power to expose the truth. The mirror showed me what the world really looked like. A vast abandoned sea, running forever with no hope for redemption.

It could have been a relatively unsurprising ending for this chapter in my life if I hadn't seen him standing there, at the other side of the water. The dark man, playing his tune, one I could never remember, one that scared the hell out of me, and one that made the rats all over the castle squeak with mirth, as if celebrating the Piper's coming.



I hadn't known he was the Pied Piper of Hamelin then. I hadn't even heard of the story before. How could I when I was denied any reading as a child?

All I knew was that the Piper would not stop at anything to cross over to the castle.

Clueless as to whether to tell the islanders or not — I wasn't even sure if they didn't know, maybe they did and I was some kind of scapegoat — I continued knitting. I was getting so good at it that I began selling clothes like my mother. At least I saved myself from starving at this point.

Then, one day I accidentally knitted something the wrong way. Instead of a semi-circle, I knitted something that looked like a letter 'e'.

My threads and pins dropped to the floor, as I stood with my jaw dropped staring at the letter.

Letters!

Words!

Stories!

Could this have been the solution I had looked for as a child? Could this have been what my mother had been secretly doing? Writing in colorful threads?

I dashed out of the castle and walked among the islanders in our small market, pretending to be buying tomatoes and salt while I was secretly staring at their clothes that my mother had woven for them.

I couldn't believe it. My heart both dropped to my feet and fluttered with amazement. Here was Jared Black, the island's pastor, wearing a cassock my mother had knitted for him. And there, if you looked hard, were small letters knitted on it. A word you could not make out among the design and many colors (he loved colorful cassocks; we had our own rules anyways on the island.)

The word said: *imposter*.

I blinked twice to make sure I read it right.

Then there was Jane Earnest, the most beloved seller of groceries. She wore a fine skirt my mother had made for her. Colorful, mostly pink and yellow, patterned in the oddest of ways. If you looked closer, you'd read the word my mother knitted: *thief*.

Oh, my. And you kept it all for yourself mother?

William Barnes, the island's major: *cheater*. Emily Three-Eyes, the island's judge: *bribed*.

And so it went. My mother had spoken and expressed herself and told the truth she could not utter through the secretly knitted words. She exposed this little peaceful island for what it really was. A band of unethical people pretending to be good, mostly.

I rushed back to the tower and spent my days and nights knitting words. I sold the biggest of canvases and rugs with my words secretly knitted through.

No one ever noticed.

It's hard to explain how much joy this gave me. I was good at it. I just found the one thing I was good at. And it had been my calling since I was a child. It brought me joy and killed the hours of day. I loved it so much, I forgot to eat sometimes.

Most importantly, when I knitted the letters I could no longer hear the Piper's calling. His demonic powers were imprisoned by the power of threads.

Don't ever underestimate a word or a thread. It's thin and weak, sometimes so thin it's invisible. But woven together, pin by pin, it grows and it can create things stronger than swords.

What I've just written is actually an understatement, because what I could do with the thread was much more than just words.



I used to thread while walking, while inspecting the rest of the endless castle. It killed time and shoved my fears of the rats to the back of my head. With a torch attached to the armor I had found in one of the rooms, my hands were free to thread — and explore.

Month after month, I didn't give up. My assumption was that one of the many rooms held the secret to the castle. I just needed to find it.

And then one day, I did.

But it wasn't a room in the sense of how we'd think a room should be. It didn't seem to have a door. A room that could only be reached by walking through, what seemed like, an endless dark hallway until it suddenly showed up. The discovery was nothing but coincidence when my torch blew out and I had to trudge my way through the dark, feeling the walls for

a way out. Suddenly, a door made of light appeared in the distance and I entered.

It turned out that you can only find this room — the immense light — through darkness. Use the torch which you think will guide you and you will be lost in our man-made-reasoning forever.

You may wonder what the room was like. That secret hidden in the castle of Camelot. Crossing the immense light, I found a library. One that was endless and intimidating. I realized it was some kind of holy place when I entered. I could feel it. The secret my mother had been talking about lay somewhere between the shelves of a million books or so.

The shelves themselves were a maze, one where they'd appear to you, but then disappear on your way back. Some shelves were labeled with words like: *the right book for you will appear at the right time*.

And: If you miss the right book at the right time, you miss the right knowledge for the right man.

And: The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he was just a character in a book.

The quotes went on and on, but I was eager to get my hand on any book. Can you imagine how I felt? All this knowledge I'd been seeking was now available for me!

Reaching for a book, I tiptoed and pulled it down. I swiped the dust away and opened it. To my surprise, the pages were empty. And then the pages turned into sand seeping through my hands, and the book just disappeared.

The same happened to a number of other books I picked up as well.

The right book for you will appear at the right time.

So what was I supposed to read in here?

It dawned on me that the library was protected by some universal force. This or the Piper would just get what he wanted once he crossed over. My mother's words rang in my head and I wondered what my role was in all of this.

I stood next to a huge wall with a canvas on it. Someone had knitted beautiful words on it. I suppose it was my mother, and the words probably described where the island was on the map of the world. It said: *East of the Moon, West of the Sun*.

A little lower it said: Or West of the Moon, East of the Sun. Whichever way you like, as long as it's kept away from the dark one.



It took days, trying to find a readable book in the library, let alone doing my best not to get lost in there. Most of the time I had armored myself with extra food and water, in case I got trapped in one of the libraries corridors for days.

Which did happen a few times.

But most of the books I was able to read didn't mean much to me. They were exciting stories, which were mostly called 'fables' and 'fairy tales' but nothing I suspected the Piper would pursue.

The search was on…

Sometimes I came across a certain room with mirrors. One of them scared me, because of a girl's voice I could hear inside one of the mirrors. It was creepy and unsettling.

I resumed my quest to find what the Piper was looking for — and what my mother wanted me to protect.

Of course, it occurred to me that the Piper wanted the library as a whole, but still there must have been that one thing I could protect before he managed to cross over.

Later in my search, I brought a ball of thread along to kill time until a new door opened for me. You see, once trapped in a part of the library you had to wait for a door to show up, or else you'd be drawn deeper into the maze.

The weaving of the balls of thread enhanced my mastery of the art. In fact, I became faster than I could have ever imagined. I could weave

without looking and never get wounded. It was as if I was born to weave clothes.

And words of course.

One time, when I was out of food, I managed to postpone my thirst and hunger by weaving a red ball of thread for hours. I wove it into a cloak then unfurled it again, then into something else waiting for the door to appear.

But it didn't, and I began starving.

What have I done? Foolish me! I think I am going to die in here.

I continued weaving and weaving, my lips going dry, my jaw tightening and my stomach buzzing. I could almost swear I went pale, though I had no mirror nearby. My breath stunk and I began to realize the door might never come.

In my darkest hour, fact and fiction entwined into a blurry fantasy of dying, and I decided I'd use the red fleece and weave… well… something to eat.

Snapping for a moment out my confusion, I saw something in my hand. Something that was madness and suggested I'd lost my mind out of hunger. In my hand, I saw a tomato.

I blinked several times. Did I imagine this?

There was one way to make sure. I bit into the tomato.

It was delicious and juicy and unbelievably real.



A door presented itself to me by the end of the day, and I rushed up the stairs to my room in the tower. I ate some more, gulped wine, and headed to my private weaving room. For a moment I hesitated, but then I had to try it again.

The first thing I wove was a ring. It worked. Then a diamond ring. It worked — not exactly at first; I realized I needed to fully and intricately

imagine the ring to weave it.

It also came out red at first. Everything came out red, but then I had to give it time to morph into its real color. Then it took me half a day before the diamond began to sparkle and shine.

This was surreal. Was it magic? I didn't care. I had the ability to weave my wishes into reality.

From that moment on, I couldn't stop weaving. Food, furniture, and clothes.

Ah, don't get me to tell you about the shoes I wove. All kinds of surreal and lovely shoes. And a dress that made me look like a princess, though I had to redo it several time to get the right size for me.

I was in awe. Both astonished and scared. What kind of gift was I given? And why?

The hours flew by. I couldn't sleep. I could weave anything I wanted. But then my mother's voice sounded in my head. I knew what she would have said. I needed to use this gift in a good cause.

So I wove as much food as I could carry, and descended to town. There I gave the food to the poor children, making sure their parents wouldn't see me, or they'd question where I got it from. I didn't trust my town's elders at this point, not after what I saw my mother had secretly sewn into their clothes.

Back in the castle, I had to hide most of what I'd woven in the secret rooms. It took forever, scattering my items in the rooms. And only then, standing in one of the rooms, did I realize something. I froze in place. I almost choked with the knowledge, then let out a shriek.

Oh, my. I realized how those rooms had been so luxuriously furnished. Someone had possessed this ability for years and woven those rooms. Was it my mother?

It perplexed me. Why would my mother hide this ability from me? And again, why were we given such a wonder?

In that moment, I realized my mother had woven much bigger things than I had done. I realized I still had so much weaving to learn.

I began weaving furniture like her. It took me weeks. Then I managed to weave a whole room. Well, sometimes with a deviated wall or a ceiling falling off. It needed a lot of imagination, and I was my own teacher.

Once I had mastered the room's design, I made it my own, and hid all of my belongings in it. I had designed it next to my other room at the top of the tower, and now understood why the dimensions of the kitchen earlier had been different inside from outside. The weaving can be manipulated to take place in a no place. I practically wove my room into the walls of my tower, and it was at least a hundred times bigger than the thickness of those walls.

I tried not to think too much. Magic was magic anyways. It wasn't supposed to be logical.

In my room I continued weaving and training, always looking for the scattered red threads my mother had left all over the castle, afraid they'd end one day. But it was too soon to think about it.

Having mastered most of what I could think of, an idea shimmered in my brain. One that while I'd thought of it was genius at the time, but I wasn't comfortable with after. The idea was like this: *Can I weave a life*?



On a rainy night, with me neglecting the Piper's calling beyond The Between, I decided to weave a cat.

Again, it worked.

Of course it took days for it to manifest, from bones to fur to eyes to whiskers to its voice to learning to walk. I had studied a certain cat I'd seen earlier by the shore to weave a similar one.

This was one of the most uncomfortable days in the beginning. It scared me. It felt unreal. Dead. Worse: back from the dead.

Several times the little creature, though looking fabulous, tried to get near me and I avoided it. Only when I understood it was hungry did things change. I realized it was a true living animal and not a beast.

Through the days, my mind veered into the worst of ideas. I don't even want to admit it now. One of my ideas was to weave my mother back, but that struck me as playing with fire. After all, there was a price for magic, and I didn't know what it was yet.

Slowly, I realized I wanted my mother back because I was lonely up there in the castle of Camelot. So I decided I'd weave a girl, a companion, like a sister maybe.

The idea worsened when I decided: why not weave a boy, a prince. Wouldn't that have been the optimum choice? A prince who looked like I imagined exactly.

Though not the best of ideas, I ran to collect as much thread as I could find. That's when I realized I was out of thread.



What came next was the worst kind of experience I had ever suffered. Some would not understand what I went through, but this must have been the price of magic: that once you taste it you could not stop.

I was going crazy, tearing bed sheets, and pulling down curtains, and even the dresses I'd woven before, trying to weave my magic from them.

It didn't work.

Only the red fleece worked as a salve to my suffering, and it could not be reused like I'd done earlier with simple clothes.

The world closed in on me and I felt trapped within my own misery. The price of magic was too much. I couldn't take it. I was addicted to it.

Not only did I need to weave more, but I felt I would die if I didn't.

Long walks on the shore didn't help. Not even mingling with others. I couldn't get it out of my mind. One night, I found myself standing on the

shore and calling for my mother, asking her if she knew of more threads.

The Between seemed too silent that night. No one answered me back, not even the Piper.

Something was wrong. If I was meant to have this gift and protect the library from the Piper, why would I be out of thread?

Back in the library, reading all I could read for days, I came upon a scant book talking about the universe. I didn't understand what a 'universe' was then. But the book explained it as the one thing that wraps the world in every direction. It decided fates and wrote down the rules of the living.

I really didn't get it.

What the book said was that a universe controlled us all, including magic, and it demanded balance. Meaning that if you've been gifted with a wonder you needed to balance with paying the price. Some sort of misery, from what I understood.

The point was, for everything white there had to be black. For night there had to be day.

I wondered how this applied to my condition, but I assumed that in order to acquire more threads I needed to be in some sort of balance that might make me miserable.

I think it was my fate, and it came sooner than I thought it'd arrive.

That night, the Piper's calling did not stop, only this time his calling had changed. It was like this: "I have your fleece, Elaine," he whispered across The Between. "Come and get it."



My weaving addiction almost got me killed that night. My legs betrayed me as I found myself walking directly toward The Between. My hands felt sweaty and I could feel my heart beat drumming in my chest, longing for the red fleece.

“Don’t hold back,” the Piper whispered, an echoing voice spreading above the expanse of The Between. I could almost see the thick mist swirl and flow to his voice. “You want it. You have a gift like no one else. And you’ve only learned half of it.”

“What do you want from me?” My voice crackled with weakness, as I found myself slowly stepping closer to the edge of The Between.

“Forget about what I want. Focus on what *you* need.”

“I don’t need anything,” I lied, my legs still moving. “I’m fine protecting whatever you want in here.”

“What I want I will get eventually,” he said. “It’s only a matter of time.”

“Time?” I grimaced. “How long?”

“Centuries. Lives upon lives, I don’t care. I’m forever in this world and will not rest until I find them.”

“Find who?”

“The Lost Seven.”

“Who are they?”

“That’s a long story,” he said. “One that actually happened a long time in the future.”

“Are you telling me you’re from the future?”

“And the past. It’s a complicated cycle of life. The world spins for centuries, then it spins again; the same story over and over again. Only I’ve never gotten to get what I want in the past versions.”

I stopped, not out of sudden bravery against my addiction, but because of the concept of a spinning world. I realized I might have come across it in the books I read in the library.

“Are you telling me this happened before?” I asked. “Am I a version of myself in a past life?”

“It’s complicated, Elaine,” the Piper said. “Not the kind of idea explained over an expanse of MIST separating us.”

Now I took a step back, immediate alertness flaring in my soul.

“Don’t deny yourself the fleece. It’s what you want. You can’t live without it, Elaine.”

“I can live without it,” I shrugged. “I only need to convince myself I’ve never learned about it.”

“One can lie to others, Elaine, but never to oneself. It’s the underlying truth in us that feeds our misery. We can’t escape who we are. Embrace it, and don’t be a fool.”

“My mother warned me about you. I will not fall for your tricks, whoever you really are.”

That made the Piper laugh. Thick swirls of mist spewed across The Between. “The last one you’d want to take advice from is your mother.”

“Don’t!”

“Think about it, Elaine. Why did your mother cross The Between?”

A lump stuck in my throat. His words inflamed a fiery vision before my eyes. Did my mother cross over because…?

“Yes,” the Piper said. “She crossed over because of her addiction for the fleece. She couldn’t help it, like you can’t now.”

“But there was plenty of it left in the castle when she died,” I countered back.

“Not hers. The red fleece works for the one it chooses, for a certain amount of time. You inherited the gift from her, so you were assigned your share of thread from the universe.”

“And she couldn’t use mine?”

“Now you understand.” He said. “Her addiction drove her crazy, and she crossed over.”

“Where is she now?”

“Imprisoned in the Gap in the Cycle of Time. She is neither here, nor there. Neither now, nor then. Lost in the space of the universe’s mind.”

“But I can hear her scream. She must be near.”

“Through the Gap. That’s how I could arrive from the future and find you.”

“I’m so confused.” I clamped my hands over my head, wishing to escape the Piper’s voice.

“Who isn’t?” He laughed again. “None of us knows why we’re here, or what the purpose of all of this is.”

“Stop it. I want you out of my head.”

“The only way to get me out of your head is to cross over and take the fleece.”

“And fall in the so called Gap like my mother?” I snap.

The mist was getting thinner and I could almost make out his shape.

“You can escape her fate, if you do something for me.”

“What do you mean?”

“You mother crossed over because of her addiction, and though I had a fleece for her, she denied me what I wanted, so she ended up lost in the Gap.”

“The castle,” I said looking at him, standing in his black cloak at the edge of the expanse. “You want the castle.”

“The castle is immune to me,” he explained. “In fact, it almost has a soul of its own. It lives everywhere, anywhere, whenever it wants, and no one knows why. I wouldn’t be surprised if you wake up and find it gone to tomorrow. It’s been called all kinds of names: The Schloss, Camelot, and even one of the pyramids in a faraway land called Egypt.”

I could not comprehend the idea at the time, but remember many of the diaries have mentioned it. The mysterious castle with no place but with a soul. “Then what is it you want? The library?”

“I could use it, but it’d drive me mad, like the Beast, but you don’t need to know about that story,” he said. “I need something only you can create.”

I grimaced again, half expecting his next sentence.

“I want you to weave something for me.”

“That’s why you need me,” I nodded, thoughtfully. “In fact, this is what you wanted all along. This why The Between is protecting us. You don’t want some*thing* in the island. You want some*one*. First my mother, then me. You so desperately need something woven for you.”

“From a red fleece.” In the distance, I saw him wave the red ball in the air. As tiny as it was, it shone bright in the black background of the night sky, partially illuminated by the ice's reflection from the ground.

“You have a source for the fleece, but have no gift,” I said.

“I have many gifts, but not the one you possess.”

“Why would I weave for you?”

“Because you’re addicted. Trust me, there is no cure to an addiction like that.”

“I suppose you’re as addicted as me. But to something else.”

The Piper’s prolonged silence allowed to me listen to the voice of The Between. A light, almost inaudible, drone, as if it was alive, as if it was just a layer of ice on the back of another whale in the Seven Seas.

“I’m addicted to revenge,” he finally said. “And my thirst can only be quenched if I find the Children of Hamelin.”

“Whoever they are, it sounds like you've been after them a long time,” I said, satisfied I had the upper hand in the conversation, for now.

“It’s a long and exhausting journey,” he said. “So long, I sometimes forget what I am after.”

“Centuries, I imagine.”

“Longer.”

“What’s longer than centuries?”

“Having to go through the Cycle of Time, over and over again. I almost caught them in many versions. But in each one, I miss one or two of them. Sometimes they live in this world, sometimes in another, sometimes in what is called the Dreamworld, and sometimes in the Gaps.”

“If I am going to weave for you, I want an endless source of fleece.”

“I don’t have that much, but I can show you a trick.”

“A trick? How can I trick the universe into having so much fleece?”

“You can never trick the universe,” he said. “Whenever you think you trick it, you’re tricking yourself. But that’s beside the point. My method will help you have an endless supply for threads. But you have to understand something.”

“What’s that?”

“There is a price for everything, especially magic.”

“I know,” I nodded. “If I’m going to give in to my addiction, I am willing to pay the price.”

“We all say that in the beginning, don’t we?” He let out another laugh of mockery. This time he was mocking himself. I wondered what price he’d paid himself. “So are you weaving for me?”

For the first — and last time — in my so long life, I surprised myself. I found myself nodding and saying yes, recklessly, addictively, and irrationally. In the end I said, “What do you want me to weave?”

“I will tell you once you cross over.”

This sounded like one of his tricks and I didn’t trust him. My mother crossed over, like many others, and they ended up being stuck in this Gap. Why would I be different, even if the Piper himself promised me so much?

“I won’t,” I said.

The Piper said nothing so I elaborated. “I imagine your fleece is long enough that you can roll it over The Between.”

“It is that long, but you know The Between is an illusion the universe created. It’s only water.”

I wondered about the power of The Between’s magic. The Piper knew it was an illusion, yet he could not sail through it. What kind of magic was so strong it damaged one’s perceptions and decisions like that? But it wasn’t the right time to ask. The Piper still could not cross, thinking the icy ground separated him from my island. He probably thought he’d fall into thin cracks of ice if he attempted to walk over. Not to mention the rumors of the mermaids underneath, who wished to eat you alive once you fell beneath the cracks.

It was mind bending. All of it was just magic and not real, yet no one dared to cross over, even the Piper himself.

“We have to take our chances,” I told him. “Because I’m not crossing over.”

Without answering back, the Piper rolled the fleece over, holding tight to its end.

I watched it snake its way across the icy snow at a ferocious speed. The Between didn’t object or fight it one bit. Sooner than I’d expected, I gripped the fleece’s end in my hand.

The tinge I felt worried me, but my addiction urged me to hold tight to it. For a moment, I almost felt I could read the Piper’s mind. A brief flash of him playing music in a town called Hamelin, rats and children following him up a hill. He was much younger then, secretly followed by a Magpie in the distance.

But that was it. I couldn’t read more of his mind. I guess mind-reading wasn’t my gift. Weaving was.

“You will have to let go on your end,” I told the Piper. “or I will not be able to weave whatever you need.”

“Not before you assure me you can weave what I want,” he said in a weaker voice. Whatever he wanted me to weave meant a lot to him.

“What is it?” I asked.

The Between’s drone escalated all of a sudden, and I could hear the screams of mermaids trapped under the ice. Illusion or not, it felt incredibly real.

“They’re warning you,” the Piper said.

“I can sense that,” I said, blinded by my addiction. “But I don’t care. I will weave you whatever you want, and in return you will show me that trick to an abundance of red fleece.”

“That’s our deal,” he called, as snowflakes rose half way through the air, like army of bees waiting to attack and stop the deal. A deal that later shaped worlds I didn’t know about then.

“Hurry.” I hung tighter to the thread. “What do you want me to weave for you.”

THE Piper’s answer struck like lightning in the sky. “Weave me a sun.”



The Piper’s words were followed with an electrifying emotion running from the thread into my hands. I realized he’d let go from his side, and I saw The Between’s drone was escalating. A whirlwind of snowflakes, accompanied by the mermaid’s screams, shook the world around me.

The feeling of the thread in my hand, ready to be woven overwhelmed me, so much that I didn’t hear the Piper’s faint shout over The Between. The drones were so loud I couldn’t hear him anymore.

And my addiction, and vanity, shot to the roof of my soul. My mind was burning with the need to weave. Without my permission it began to imagine a sun.

The Piper wanted a sun?

I didn’t care. All that fascinated me was that I had never thought of it. Did I possess a gift so wondrous I could weave a sun? A moon? A whole world?

It had never crossed my mind, for it was absurd to have a girl like me possess such capabilities. Why would the universe ever grant me this?

The thread snaked around my hands, bending to my needs, begging for me to design with it. I closed my eyes, giving in to my brain’s depiction of a sun. And though the sun on my island rarely shone through the gloomy sky, I seemed to envision another sun perfectly. A red one. Large and fiery it could burn for years and years and never sink.

The image was so strong I began to sweat, feeling its heat on my body. But how would I turn a fleece the size of a big apple into the sun?

The Between’s rage and the whirling snow seemed to help in the most unexpected of ways. Its desire to stop me only intensified my gift. I suddenly felt stronger, larger than life itself. If I had wings, I’d be flying. The heat in my body was not from the sun I’d imagined in my head, but from the energy I never knew I had inside me.

“What are you doing?” I think I heard the Piper shout.

But I didn’t care. The addiction was so strong in me, and I honored it with all I could give. The red fleece began to expand in my hand. I could feel it doing so, and I opened my eyes.

Twice its size.

Thrice.

Lightning struck in the sky and the earth shook and the mermaids wailed.

Don’t do it. Don’t do it. You got it wrong!

Whether those were the voices of The Piper or the mermaids, I had become unstoppable. I’d need so many lifetimes to explain the feeling to you. The feeling of being inhuman, bigger than everything else, the feeling of being a god.

The fleece floated off of my hands, expanding like a balloon — I learned about balloons later in life, of course. I watched it rise higher and grow bigger and bigger, taking its space in the night sky. Light shone from it, so strongly I had to shield my eyes a little.

I envied it. How I wished I was the sun itself. How I wished I was that powerful. That high, cut from a different *cloth* than the rest of the human race.

But I reasoned it was my design, my creation. Like every foolish human, I made the mistake of thinking I controlled the world while still standing on my feet, unable to even flap my hands and fly like tiny birds. I'd witness that foolishness later in life, so many times. Men building rockets and reaching for the moon, thinking they've conquered the world. Only to realize how small and fragile we all are.

It wasn't long before the sky had been invaded by the sun. My sun. The island was lit from corner to corner, and suddenly what we'd all perceived as night had turned into day.

I could literally knit anything in this world.

My hands raised from my sides, feeling powerful as no human should ever feel, I let out a prolonged laugh, enjoying the sunshine on my face.

Somewhere in the distance I heard the islanders arrive, astonished by my creation. I was invincible.

But only for a few minutes, and then darkness came. Not the kind of visual darkness you'd expect. The world was still lit up, but it was The Between that shrunk, stride by stride.

It was melting because of the sun I'd created.

And suddenly the island it protected wasn't only part of the endless seas before us.

The Piper had fooled me. The barrier between him and us had been dissolved.



Until this day, what followed is still vague and half-remembered by me. All I know is that I disrupted the balance in the universe by creating a sun that had never been there.

“You need to balance it now!” The Piper was suddenly standing before me, which confused me even more.

“You want me to balance it? I thought you tricked me into creating a sun that would dissolve The Between.”

The ground shook again, but this time the sea raged behind the Piper, splashing enormous waves at us. The Piper seemed to be trying to tell me something again, but I failed to hear most of it.

All I made out before falling back to the splashing wave was, “*Moon!*”

And he threw two other fleeces toward me. Magically I caught them while on the ground. I hugged them dearly while resisting the wave kicking me away. As for the Piper, I couldn’t believe he had been struggling with the sea like this.

I floated away from him, wishing for a way back to shore, still clinging to the balls of thread and guarding them with my life.

But there was no way out.

All I found was a wooden log. I clung to it and climbed up, hardly breathing. The sea had turned into eruption of anger all around me. I must have answered the universe in the most sinful of ways by weaving a sun.

“*Moon!*” The Piper’s words rang in my ears again.

Why would he say that? Why, when he’d seemed not to have wanted me to weave a sun — minutes after he’d asked me to?

In my confusion, realizing I could drown in any moment, I concluded that the only way to redeem myself was to weave a moon. That must have been what he had meant.

The universe demands balance, doesn’t it?

I started weaving, rocking upon the log and risking falling in at any moment. I didn’t need a pin. At this point I could weave telepathically,

sewing the threads into whatever I chose.

The hardest part wasn't the weaving, but imagining a moon in my head with all the chaos around me.

The red fleece shaped into my palm, and like the sun it began to double in size. But it was still red.

I had to focus hard to turn it into a white ball expanding and floating up in the air before me. It only began working when I began freezing because of a sudden cold in my limbs. At first, it looked as if it were a snowball, fluffy and uneven at the edges, but soon it hardened and rose up to the limitless sky.

Exhausted, I lay back on the log, watching my creations colliding in the sky above me. The sun's fire and the moon's eternal cold. Half of the world around me had turned dark to the moon's demands, the rest was still day, honoring the red sun.

"What now?" I screamed out at the universe, wherever, or whatever it was. "I made a mistake, and tried to balance it. What else should I do?"

There was no answer from the universe. No man heard my complaint. Not even the Piper. Only one person answered me through her wailings across what had once been The Between. My mother.

"He never asked you to weave a sun," I could hear her say to me. "You misheard, my little one."

"What are you talking about?" I said, unable to locate her. "I heard him tell me to weave a sun in exchange for the eternal supply of fleece."

"He didn't, but it's too late now. You need to help the universe create balance to what you have disrupted by weaving a sun."

"But I have created a moon," I said. "Shouldn't that create balance?"

"A red sun against a white moon isn't enough of a balance," she said. "Balances don't come in two. It's not a farmer's scale. It's the balance of the universe's soul."

“Don’t lecture me, Mother. Tell me what to do.” I desperately said gripping the log’s edge as it threatened to throw me off.

“Weave a third thing with your fleece,” she advised.

I gripped that last ball of thread I had and asked her, “What should I weave, Mother?”

“Darkness, dear,” she said. “Balance comes in threes. Red, White, and Black.”

In spite of the flawed and melancholic logic — which I learned much more about in the years to come — I didn’t know how the hell to weave darkness.

I uttered my concerned to her, and she replied, “Weave sorrow, my little one.”

“How can I imagine sorrow, mother?”

“That’s what the Piper wanted to cross over for,” she said. “Only you can weave sorrow. It’s a gift that the universe chose you for.”

“Why would the universe choose me to weave sorrow? Why me?”

“You’ll understand, but not now, little one.”

Tired of asking I closed my eyes and began weaving…

It would take me a million diaries to explain what I had seen with my eyes closed. All you need to know is that in me I found the secret that later made the Brothers Grimm do what they’d done many years later.

The sorrow I weaved turned into a black wave floating before me, higher and higher, all the way up to the sun and moon. It turned into an endless veil, covering both the sun and moon. I had basically woven a blackened sky that encompassed us all inside, without ever knowing what I’d done — at the time.

Soon the sea’s rage subsided and the world calmed again. The sun gave in and sank into the depths of the sea, giving way to the night with my moon shining full and bright — later the sun and moon would exchange

appearances every few hours, creating a cycle of night and day for the first time.

I let out a long sigh and permitted myself to faint.



A day or two later, I woke up in a tower in the middle of the sea, not the Camelot tower and not the island where I originated from. I sat on a chair, facing my mother's mirror again. In its reflection I saw I had one red fleece behind me. When I turned to grab it, my mother's voice echoed in the room.

"Don't," she said. "Don't turn."

"Why, Mother?"

"It's part of the deal," she said. "You're bound to never leave this room, let alone turn away from the mirror."

"What are you talking about? I never asked for this in my deal with the Piper."

"But you asked for an endless supply of fleece to feed your addiction."

"So?" I squinted in the mirror. "I only see one ball of fleece behind me."

"It's the one that will help your endless supply."

"How so?"

"Reach for the mirror," she said.

"Reach for the mirror?"

"Don't worry, your hand will slice through it.

The idea fascinated me, so I gave it a try. My hand slid through smoothly.

"Now reach for the fleece you see in the mirror," she said.

I did, and to my surprise, I grabbed it and pulled it back.

“See?” my mother said. “Here is your endless supply.” She pointed at the mirror still showing a fleece behind me.

“Then what’s the ball of fleece in my hand?”

“As long as you face the mirror and never turn, the one ball of fleece will always reflect in the mirror,” she explained. “It doesn’t matter how much you pull; the supply never ends.”

“As long as I am a prisoner of the mirror.” I lowered my head in regret.

“As long you’re prisoner to your addiction,” my mother insisted.

“What happens if I turn and break the deal?”

“Who knows?” she said. “But will you ever do it?”

Her voice was punishment to my actions. She knew I could never give up on creating things. Who would?

“So this is it?” I said. “The Piper fooled me?”

“The Piper just showed you the way to your darkest desires. The desire in all of us humans; to pretend we’re gods.”

Her words almost killed me. I had never even thought about it this way. I was just a lonely girl, enjoying her gifts. If the universe didn’t want me to mess things up that bad, why had it granted me such powers?

“But I never really made the deal with the Piper,” I argued.

“What do you mean?”

“You said he never asked me to weave a sun. You said I misheard.”

“You did, little one. But mishearing doesn’t mean you didn’t make the deal. The universe works with intentions. Your intention was to give him whatever he wanted to have your endless supply of thread.”

“That’s not fair,” I said.

“The universe isn’t fair. It only demands balance.”

“I don’t understand what this means. Frankly, I don’t like this universe at all.”

My mother took a longer moment to answer. “I believe it’s best not to react so soon,” she said. “I raised you to be a good girl. You just made a mistake. It happens to all of us, but it doesn’t mean we have to pay for the mistake forever.”

“You’re contradicting yourself, Mother.” I pointed at the mirror. “I will pay for this forever.”

“You don’t have to. No, if you use your gift of weaving for the good things in life. Weave flowers. Rivers. Birds. Babies. All the things that mean something to someone. Use your addiction to give, not to take. To birth not to kill. If I were you, I’d weave a whole world where good people could live in, maybe escape villains hunting them and wanting to harm them. There is always a way to do good, if you want to.”

This time she’d stolen the words out of my mouth. Maybe this is what the universe had in store for me — though the story never ended there; my life in the tower was incredibly interesting.

I watched my mother’s wraith walk away toward the wall, preparing to leave, but I had to stop her. One more question bothered me. “Mother?”

“Yes?”

“You said I misheard the Piper.”

“You did?”

“But I’m sure he wanted me to weave a sun.”

“Trust me, you misheard.”

“Then correct me and tell me what it was.”

“What do you think is most precious thing a weaver can weave, Elaine?”

I didn’t know the answer. Not right away. I was in too much shock to think straight.

“A person,” she answered me. “Like you did with your cat in the Camelot castle. Remember when you almost wove a prince charming?”

“I do. Are you telling me the Piper wanted me to wave a person? But I’m sure he said…”

“Son,” my mother said. “He never wanted a sun shining in the sky. The Piper has no use for light. He loves darkness and sorrow.”

“He wanted me to weave a son?” I repeated the words on my lips for no other reason but to remind myself of my stupidity. Why had I assumed he asked for a sun? Probably because of my ego, wanting to explore what I can do with my gift. My selfishness denied me the blessing of listening tentatively and carefully.

“The Piper is weary from the cycles of repeated life he’s taken to find the Lost Seven,” my mother said. “It’s true that he is probably immortal, but it doesn’t mean he is not exhausted. He needs someone to pass the torch to.”

“But why wouldn’t he marry?”

“The Piper can’t love. The cycle has blackened his heart. He can’t give. He can’t create a child.”

“So he wanted me to weave a son for him. I’m thankful I misheard,” I sighed. “Imagine the world with another Piper.”

“Who said he will give up? He will get his son, sooner or later,” she said. “Maybe that’s what the universe is preparing you for. To stand up to him when his son arrives and weave worlds that will defy him.”

“Maybe,” I said thoughtfully, and then waved goodbye to my mother.

And so the centuries passed with my lonely self trapped in the tower. Things were slow and boring, but I wove beautiful things on the way. All until something happened that changed me from Elaine of Astolat to Lady Shallot. Something that helped me give birth to a girl who could weave like me. But instead of weaving life, she could weave something much more beautiful. She could weave dreams.

And that my friend is a diary for another time.

End of Diary

MY NOTES

Written by the Beast

I am baffled at how everyone has an origin story. Frankly, I'd never thought of Lady Shallot's, but what a story.

It makes me wonder if some prequels tackle the inception of Sorrow – or even the world. Does Lady Shallot know about this?

I'm only disappointed I didn't get to know more about the Sun and the Moon, but I'm sure their turn will come, and that they'll answer a lot of my questions.

What I'm really curious about is the Piper's need to have a son, and whether there is a good reason behind it. Even better, is it possible that he succeeded? Is the Piper's son secretly living among us?

I picked up the last prequel on this shelf and read its title. It's an interesting title. I'm ready for the last prequel in this set. Something tells me it has a hell of a revelation.



Grimm Prequel #24

Spindle, Spindle Little Star

as told by Grandmother Madly

Dear reader,

It would be a good idea to walk away from this diary now and let its pages dissolve into sand, leaving its secrets unveiled forever. The story you're about to hear is going to break your heart, as it has broken mine and Jack's, a million times before. Trust me child, walk away, don't read any further. Some mysteries aren't meant to be solved.

Yet here you are. You haven't left. I knew it. You just can't walk away. Who can? We're all addicted to stories, the more miserable the better. Funny how this would come from someone like me. Mother Goose herself.

Telling you my own story is for another time and another place. You'll probably hear about me from someone else. Right now, I want to tell you about Jack Madly.

Remember how he wakes up screaming sometimes at night? That nightmare which has haunted him forever? That nightmare which he has never even told Marmalade about?

I'm going to tell you about now. Read on your own risk…



At almost fourteen years old, Jack had been living with me for some time. A year or so. Before this, he lived with his parents in the middle of a perpetual snow, in a town I wouldn't want to remember the name of. Not because it scared me, not the town, oh no, but the people who lived there. In particular, Jack's father.

God help me not have his name touch my lips or stain my memories. That evil man.

It would be a long, long story telling you what Jack's father did to him, and others. Now, sitting here and thinking of Jack's childhood before I met

him, I realize he'd lived two nightmares at such a young age.

The first, with his father. The second, with me.

Don't think I am evil. Far from it. I've loved Jack with all of my being. I've always treated him as my grandson. Or else why would I have picked him from that cave in the barren snow mountain, crying his heart out.

The first time I'd tried to talk to him, he didn't even move, it was as if I didn't exist. He sat by the fire, hands cupped over his bents knees, sobbing.

"J…" He sniffed. "J…"

"Is that your name?" I knelt down beside him.

"J…" Jack stuttered, watching me with his moist eyes.

I was just an elderly country woman, wearing a bonnet the shape of a sunflower, and Persian shawl on my shoulders. I looked more like a peasant, and was known to have small geese following me wherever I went.

"Oh," I said. "Your name starts with a J?"

Jack responded by stuttering the same letter on and on.

My geese, as if sympathizing with him, surrounded him. One brushed its face against his feet.

"G…geese?" Jack said, patting the one at his feet.

I nodded. "They're strong, just like you."

"I'm not strong. I'm afraid."

"You don't have to be," I said. "See those geese? They look weak and helpless, dumb sometimes," I chuckled, teasing them. "But you know what? They fly as steady as any powerful bird in the sky. They migrate a lot, undertaking journeys to new destinations. Always curious about life."

"They do?"

"Some journeys are hard and may take long, but they always get there. That's why they can help people find the perseverance needed to go on with their quests," I said. "In earlier times, shamans were aided by the 'spirit geese' on their journeys to the other worlds."

“Shamans? Other worlds?” Jack’s eyes opened wide, and I could see a fine curious young man behind them.

“Even in ancient Egypt and ancient China the goose is considered a messenger between Heaven and the Earth.”

Jack’s mouth hung open. I knew he couldn’t comprehend half of what I had told him, and I didn’t need him to. I wanted to take his mind off whatever bothered him. I always said this with children, telling them fantastic stories to take their minds off their worries.

“Do you have a place you call home?” I asked, now that he stopped sobbing.

“I don’t want to go home.” He lowered his head. “I fear my father.”

I didn’t ask, and respected his wish. “Do you have a place to stay then?”

“Only in this cave. I eat beans from a nearby tree. I am a good climber.”

“But you can’t stay here forever,” I offered. “Come with me.”

“Where?”

“I have a small cottage in the forest.” I smiled. “You will get to eat and sleep, and play with my geese.”

Jack’s reluctance took some time. I could tell he’d never left his house before. But he finally gripped my offered hand.

“What do I call you?” he asked.

“Grandmother Madly,” I said, as I had never been called Mother Goose until after an incident in the near future. “How about you? What is your name?”

“Jack.”

“Nice name, Jack. I guess that’s what you’d been trying to tell me earlier, repeating the J letter over and over.”

“No.” His faced dimmed again. “I was reciting my sister’s name.”

“Sister?”

“Yes,” he said. “Her name is Jill.”



Only weeks later did Jack tell me about Jill. They had both feared their cruel father after a terrible and shocking incident when intended to see them for a hefty price in the Goblin Market — not only for money but also to avenge their mother for cheating on him.

That day, Jack had managed to escape, pulling away from the goblins and throwing cold snow into their crotches. He grabbed his sister's hand and guided her toward a hill they used to climb for fun.

Jack and Jill went up a hill.

The hill led to the other side of the island they inhabited, toward a small town where they could've escaped forever. Except that Jack accidentally fell back and Jill tumbled after.

Jack fell down and broke his crown and Jill came tumbling after.

Instantly the goblins captured Jill again. But Jack instinctually, and without thinking, ran up again.

If I can save myself, I can come back for her and save her. He'd told himself.

Jack ran even further, torn between his freedom and saving his sister. All he could think about was he'd come back for her, maybe when he'd found help on the other side, which was the Kingdom of Sorrow, where I lived.

So for many months, Jack, instead of appreciating his life with me, he hated me the most. Why? Because I wouldn't let him go back to save his sister.

I knew what kind of man her father was, and had no means of helping her. In truth, I believed Jill had been sold long ago and we were never to see her again.

Then was the matter of not knowing how to find the uncharted island where they lived. It hadn't even been known in Sorrow, as if it was a portal to another place in time. Saving Jill was simply impossible.

And that's where the poor boy's nightmares began.

Every night, he'd be sweating in this bed, waking up with a shuddering scream and saying, "J..", over and over.

We hadn't moved to live in a tree by then. My cottage was small and his screams worried my geese, though I tried my best spells to help him forget her, but Jack just couldn't.

He was caught living in *Sorrow* without his sister, and it tore his heart out.

One day, Jack couldn't take anymore. We'd fought too long about Jill, and I confessed my inability to help him find his way back home. So Jack shouted and cursed like he'd never done and left the house. What happened next I only learned much later, but I'll be happy to write about it now

"Where'd you go?" I asked.

"Anywhere far from you."

"But I love you, Jack."

"I hate you," he said. "I will climb a tree in the middle of the forest and stay there forever."

"How can you stay in a tree forever?"

"I don't know but I will do it, so you'll never find me again. I want to be alone!"

And so Jack left…



Jack spent his days and nights in that tree. He wasn't joking about it. It was a certain tree in the forest that had attracted him in strange ways. Maybe because it had been rumored to have erupted out of the earth all of a sudden. Someone had planted a few beans and there it was, that mysterious tree.

I didn't know how Jack climbed up then, but later I realized the tree spiraled forever upward. So much it seemed like a road to the Heavens. Jack enjoyed it immensely. It helped him forget about Jill, me, and reinforced his idea of spending his life in a tree.

One thing that worried him were the owners of the house nearby. The tree seemed to be part of a vast garden behind a small cottage in the forest. An isolated cottage that looked as if abandoned.

But Jack didn't give it much thought. He'd never seen the house's occupants, if there were any. And he'd known so much about the tree that he knew where to hide if someone caught him.

His first discovery was jumping from one tree to another using the vines dangling from high above. It wasn't an easy task, but he mastered it after almost breaking his neck twice. When he fell on his back, the monkeys laughed at him and continued their own self amusing circus of vine jumping.

But Jack was stubborn. No monkey was better than him. A few weeks in and he could jump as good as them, if not better. He was getting stronger as a boy.

One day a monkey stole Jack's food, snatched it from his hand while he was about to bite into it. An apple, one he'd found lost in the forest. Golden apples were his favorite.

"Give it back, you thief!" Jack protested.

The monkey smirk and said, "Catch me if you can."

Jack winced. "You can talk?"

"No, I can't," the monkey cooed. "I'm only messing with you!"

It took Jack a whole day of jumping to catch the monkey. His hands were weak from holding onto the ropes, and his vision blurred out of hunger, but he learned so much that day.

He learned that he'd taken advantage of the food I, Grandmother Madly, had offered him. I did all the hunting, slicing and cooking, and he just ate. Now, to eat and survive, he had to fight for it.

Jack located the monkey's den in one of the trees and hid somewhere between the branches. The apple the monkey had stolen didn't entice him anymore. He saw the monkey eat another brilliant fruit.

It was yellow, and looked so delicious. He watched them peel the yellow layer off and bit into the juicy whites.

The monkeys chewed. Jack drooled.

What was that fruit, and why did they love it so much?

“Ba-na-na!” the talking monkey who didn’t talk, told him.

“Ba?” Jack grimaced.

“Na!” the monkey helped.

“Na?” Jack jumped. The fruit wasn’t only delicious but had an incredibly cool name.

“Here is a Ba.” The monkey offered a piece to another companion monkey nearby. “I get the Na.” He spoiled himself with the second chunk of the banana. “And you, Jack, get the other Na.”

“I want the Ba, not the Na!” Jack joked.

“Don’t be greedy,” the monkey said. “The first rule of thievery is to steal what you need, not what you want, or you’d be a bad thief.”

“I didn’t know there was a good thief.”

“Of course there is.” The monkey drummed his chest. “Us.”

And so the monkey showed Jack how they stole the bananas from the farmers in the market. It was another daunting task; stealing, hanging from the roof with their lanky arms. But Jack learned fast. He felt as if he were born to become a thief.

A good one.

Jack watched the monkeys bring back food to their children, enough food to survive, but not too much to spoil them.

“Guard your oath of good thievery with your life,” the monkey said. “Or you’ll be tempted to become a bad thief.”

“I will,” Jack thanked it. “Are you really a talking monkey?” He had to ask again.

“No,” the monkey said. “I am a figment of the imagination of a lonely boy on a tree.”

Whether that was true or not, Jack jumped back to his favorite tree. That night he ate what he needed, not what he wanted, not too much, and saved the rest for tomorrow.

Lying on his back, hands behind his head, he watched the moon floating up in the sky. The moon had fascinated Jack ever since he'd set foot in the tree.

Then it came. The thud. The loud hump that shook all trees and the earth around him. It wasn't the first time Jack had heard it. What was it? An earthquake up in the trees?



The thud rarely happened again.

What occupied Jack's mind was the immense possibilities of the world in the trees. Each tree was a country of its own. Some were occupied with squirrels, sometime insects, birds, and other animals. Some trees were abandoned and felt like a haunted house. Jack avoided those at all cost.

Then one day, he came upon a tree full of pumpkins. Orange and juicy-looking pumpkins. They were big. Much bigger than the ones he'd seen before. And they were rather organized, each five were in a semi-circle.

"Who brought them here?" Jack itched his temples and bit on a white rose he'd picked from one of the trees. He loved having it between his lips.

"I didn't know pumpkins grew on trees," he said to himself. "Somebody must love pumpkins very much. But would he eat all of them?"

Jack attempted to sit on one when he heard a faint shriek.

"Who's there!" he demanded.

Nothing. The shriek was brief and only happened once.

"Okay," he told himself. "I must be imagining them, like the monkeys."

Then he sat again on the pumpkin.

Another shriek.

This one was longer, more of a moan.

"I can't be imagining this," he said.

Then an idea occurred to him. He began leaning towards the pumpkin with his buttocks again, and he could sense the shriek about to happen.

What was that? Did it come from the pumpkin?

“Are you screaming, pumpkin?” Jack didn’t like he was talking to a pumpkin, but he just did it.

“I don’t like to be sat upon,” the pumpkin said. “You will crush me.”

Jack’s eyes widened. There was no point in responding quickly. He still could have been imagining a talking pumpkin.

“Are you really talking to me?” he asked reluctantly.

“Of course, I am,” the pumpkin said. It even shook a little. Jack’s winced back. “Go away. This is a pumpkin tree. You’re not a pumpkin.”

“I sure am not,” Jack rolled his eyes. “But there can’t be a talking tree either.”

Then the thud occurred in the distance again.

Jack winced, balancing on one foot as the tree bent and the pumpkins rolled to the edges, none of them falling though. *Those pumpkins have some great self-control not to fall like that.*

But then he saw what it was.

The top of one of the pumpkins fell apart. Jack realized it had been cut in half but hadn’t noticed earlier. And it actually was a hollow pumpkin.

Jack lowered his other foot and stood alert.

Hair dangled out of the pumpkin and then a tiny figure of a girl rolled out. She was six years old, Jack thought. He watched her sigh then ruffle her hair, spewing out pumpkin seeds. Jack had to bend over to inspect the pumpkin. It was hollow from inside. The girl was hiding in it.

“I didn’t know pumpkins were humans,” Jack leaned against the tree, smirking and biting on his white flower.

“I am not a pumpkin you fool,” the girl lisped. He noticed she had a missing tooth. “I’m a child.”

“Like I haven’t noticed,” Jack said. “Nice little home you have in there.”

“Don’t make fun of me. I had to or I would be sold in the Goblin Market.”

“The goblins have a market?”

“How can you not know about it? They steal children and sell them to the highest buyer in there. It’s right next to the Swamp of Sorrow.”

“Now I know why I haven’t seen it,” Jack said. “The swamp reeks of frogs. I hate frogs.”

“You wouldn’t be able to get into the market anyway,” the girl said. “It’s private, and the goblins will eat you alive if they can’t sell you.”

“But wait, I thought I heard my grandmother say the goblins make something called the Forbidden Fruit.”

“They do, but they sell kids for profit.”

“That’s awful,” Jack said. “Did you escape?”

“Yes.”

“Why not go back to your family?”

“They’re the ones who wanted to sell me.”

Jack was speechless. He remembered his ruthless father instantly. Then he remembered Jill, but he didn’t hang on to the thought or he’d collapse crying again. “Why did they want to sell you? They hate you *that* much?”

“They need money. We’re poor,” the girl said. “I have nine siblings, but they said I make the most noise. So it was my turn.”

“I’m sorry. I really am. Listen, why don’t you come to my tree. I have bananas.”

“I love bananas,” the girl squealed. “But do you have enough for all of us?”

“Us?”

The girl then pointed at the rest of the pumpkins. All the children that had escaped the Goblin Market came rolling out.



And so Jack, at the age of thirteen, was practically responsible for more than twenty pumpkins. First, he made sure they nested their hiding pumpkins in the tree so whenever the goblins came looking for them they'd

still not see them. Then, he fed them bananas and beans and all he could steal from the forest. Jack even sang to them before bedtime. He then made sure they were sleeping well, before going to sleep himself.

Which he ended up unable to do. The pumpkins claimed he snored like an angry pig, so he had to take fast naps by day.

But the thuds were becoming more and more frequent. Jack asked the pumpkins what it was and they told him it was the giant of the trees who many times squashed their pumpkins with a child inside.

"Giant in a tree?" Jack asked. "Why would a giant live in a tree? Wouldn't it be more convenient if he lived on the ground since people will fear him? Besides, how could those trees possibly carry a giant?"

"You're asking too much, Jack," the pumpkins said. "We're hungry."

"Then eat your bananas."

"We're fed up with bananas. We aren't monkeys. We want real food."

"Real food like what?"

"Loaves of bread." They licked their lips. "How about meat? Real meat. Grilled with sauce and smelling delicious?"

"But..."

"Just get it, Jack. For us."

Jack sighed and continued his absurd role as a surrogate young father. While he didn't really want to spoil the children, it was the dream he had that night that changed his mind and urged him to get them what they asked for. It was a special dream, about someone he missed so much.

It was Jill.

He dreamt of Jill still trapped in the basement of her new owner, having sold for a cheap price in the Goblin Market. He dreamed of his mother helplessly crying in her abandoned cottage in the middle of snow. She’d grown weak with the years and couldn't help herself. Not against a dark man like his father.

Jack wanted to help her but couldn't enter the house in the dream. He was locked out in the snow, risking freezing to death. So his dream took

him back to wherever Jill was, in a dark house in a forgotten forest. He could not help her either, but he could hear her talking to him.

"Go help the children." Jill said. "I will forgive you for leaving me behind if you get them what they want. Don't mess it up this time. They need you like I needed you. Don't disappoint them like you disappointed me."

Jack woke up sweating. "J...," he stuttered.

The sun hadn't come up yet, and Jack wondered if Jill hadn't been sold in the Goblin Market. After all, it was Jack whom his father hated the most. It was Jack who wasn't his *so-called-father*'s light son. May the old dark man had finally sympathized with his own flesh and blood, Jill, and forgave. Just maybe.

Once the sun kissed his face, he climbed down and ran to the grocery market. Like a mad boy, he began stealing loaves from the men and woman walking back from the market.

"Thief!" a woman cried.

"Catch the young thief who stole my loaf of bread!"

Jack realized he'd lost it, stealing aggressively and not being coy and smart about it. He realized that in his mind he'd thought that being a good thief would mean not getting caught.

He was very wrong.

Soon, the men and women were chasing after him, shouting at him. Jack ran and ran. Suddenly, the vast forest seemed narrow and small. He had no way to escape, as he couldn't just run to a tree and climb it, otherwise he would end up exposing his -- and the children's -- hideaway.

It occurred to him to run to me, his grandmother, and hide in my cottage. But he was too far away and his chasers had already memorized what he looked like.

Jack was only able to hide behind a green bush, just briefly to catch his breath. But they might catch him hiding there.

As he was hiding, he saw man in a green outfit walk by. On impulse, Jack ran toward him and knocked him down. Then he stole the man's green outfit, which was too big for him but helped him blend with the bushes.

Now they were both the same color. If he could only find a green hat as well, they'd never distinguish him from the bushes where he was hiding.

But he found none so he ducked, waiting for his chasers to give up on finding him.

For hours, Jack crouched in his green outfit behind the bush. The more time that passed, the safer he felt. They weren't going to catch him after all.

Or so he thought.

A hand suddenly gripped his shoulder. Jack couldn't move. It was a strong grip, probably a man thrice his age.

"Bad thief," the man said.

Jack said nothing, but closed his eyes in disappointment.

"I'm a good thief."

"There is no such thing," the man said.

"I am stealing food to feed those who need it," Jack argued, wishing he could turn around and see the man's face.

"Why couldn't they get their food themselves?" the man inquired.

"They're six-year-olds. They need my help."

"I think it's you who needs help. What are you, ten years old?"

"I am thirteen!" Jack gritted his teeth. He hated strangers mistaking him for a younger lad.

"You should be going to school."

"I hate school."

The man took his time to answer. Jack thought he'd heard the man chuckle. "I hated school, too." The man's grip loosened, exchanged by a light tap on the shoulder.

Jack reluctantly turned around.

There was so much to take in at once. The man looked in his thirties but far from what Jack had assumed. He looked... well Jack had no word to describe the feeling then, but in later life he would know that the word he had been looking for was 'cool'.

The man stood leaning against a tree, one foot crossed over the other and biting on a white rose, just like Jack used to do. Only this man did it cooler.

He was a lanky man, but well built. He wore a green outfit, like Jack's, only cooler and warrior-like. His face was a bit rugged. Jack could tell the man had had his share of man-to-man fights. And that smirk on the corner of his mouth never abandoned him. It was the look of a man who'd seen the world's fears and laughed at them. A look of man who had fun with everything he did.

> But most exquisite of all, the man wore on his head what Jack had wished for. A green hat.

Let me rephrase that. The coolest green hat ever.

"How are you?" the man asked Jack.

It was some out of the blue question. How are you? What kind of conversation was that?

"I am feeling exhausted and confused," Jack said.

"Really?" The man tongued the flower in his mouth. "And?"

"My life is a mess. I disappointed my sister. Got angry with my grandmother who loves me dearly. Went to live alone in a tree. I think I talked to monkeys, but am not sure. Tried to do good, feeding the children who count on me. But ended up being caught as a thief. Who knows what will happen to me now."

"Wow," the man said. "That's too much drama for a ten-year-old."

"Thirteen!"

"Not really much of a difference," the man dismissed him. "Now listen to me carefully."

"I am."

"I will let you go, under one condition," the man said.

"Anything you say," Jack pleaded.

"You promise that whenever anyone asks you how you are doing, you will never give that pathetic speech you've just given me."

"I promise."

"Not so fast." The man threw the flower away and waved a hand at Jack. "I want you to always answer the 'how are you?' with one word. And one word only."

"One word? However I feel like?"

"I don't care if your grandmother just died or your children are hungry or if you had the worst day in your life. You never show people how you really feel, and thus, answer with one word only."

"If will let me go, I'll do whatever you ask," Jack said. "What's the word?"

"Awesome!" the man said, theatrically waving his arms as if he were the coolest pirate in the world.

"Awe-what?" Jack had never heard that word before, but he was curious to know it. Because the man seemed so confident and full of himself saying it. And Jack realized he'd die to feel the same way.

"Oh-some," the man spelled. "Kinda."

"Kinda?" Jack grimaced.

"Forget that last one. You just say ‘awe’, as if someone just pinched you hard, then some. You know how to say some, don't you?"

"Awesome," Jack said.

"Now, that's how the word is spelled, but not how it feels." The man pursed his lips. "You see, words are nothing but letters. Dead alphabets, which have no meaning. It's the way we say a word that gives it color and enlivens it."

"Awesome." Jack tried to sound enthusiastic.

"Not like that." The man took Jack's hands and pulled them upward to the sky. "Now chin up, young man. Chest forward. Imagine you're that person who everyone wants to become."

"I don't know what that person is like," Jack argued.

"Like me," the man said. "I am awesome."

Slowly Jack understood. He realized he really wanted to be like this man in the green hat. A man who didn't really care about what others thought of him and only did as he pleased.

"Awesome!" Jack roared.

"That's it!" The man's eyes brightened. "Now what's your name, young man?"

"Jack. Jack Madly."

"Say I am Jack Madly and I am awesome!"

Jack's heart pumped saying the words. He felt so free and accepting of the world. And the best part was he had no such reason to. It felt... well, awesome.

"No matter how you feel this is how you think of yourself," the man added. "In your darkest hours, you should know that you're awesome and it will get better. Got it?"

Jack nodded eagerly.

"You know what will make you really awesome?"

"Not sure what?"

"This." The man took of his hat and placed on Jack's head.

Jack could not explain the euphoria he felt. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Keep it. Now, about being a bad thief."

"I know. I will stop stealing."

"Of course you will not, you fool," the man said. "I want you to keep stealing."

"Really?"

"But you're doing it wrong."

"How so?"

"A bad thief steals from everyone and anyone, even if he ends up feeding the hopeless children like you do," the man preached. "Look at yourself; stealing from the poor to feed the poor. The right way to do it is to steal from the rich." The man pointed at the far away castle at the top of the bill, where the king and queen of Sorrow lived.

"You want me to steal from them?" Jack almost shrieked.

"They're the ones who wouldn't even notice you stole from them. I mean steal a loaf of bread from a poor man and he'd never forgive you because he and his children will sleep hungry that night. But steal from the queen's kitchen, I'd doubt they'd even notice the missing piece."

Jack shrugged, imaging how hard it would be to steal from the castle. But it would also be fun and challenging. Besides, he was awesome now. Awesome thieves need to steal awesome things.

"Trust me," the man said. "It'll only scare you the first couple of times, but then you'll master it. Now go and be an awesomely good thief."

And just like that, the man turned around and walked away, slowly disappearing into the night.

"You don't want your hat back?" Jack offered.

"Keep it. It's yours," the man's voice said from the dark of the forest.

Jack stood stranded, wondering if he'd just imagined this man like he may have imagined the monkeys. But hey, he wore the green hat so the man had to be real. Still, he had one last question.

"What's your name, sir?"

"I have many," the man said. "But some like to call me Robin Hood."



Soon, Jack learned how to steal from the Sorrow's castle, and he has never been caught - yet.

He had figured out a way to sneak his tiny body into the carriage which transported groceries into the castle. Like the children, he hid in a pumpkin. The Queen of Sorrow had always been fond of huge and oblong pumpkins. It was said she never ate them, but enjoyed the feel of squashing them against someone's face. Jack not only enjoyed hiding inside them, but they were delicious too.

Well, let's rephrase that again: Jack thought the pumpkins were awesomely delicious.

"I'm Jack Madly and I am awesome," he would whisper to himself, hiding in the closet in the kitchen with all his recently stolen possessions, waiting for the cooks to leave so he could sneak back into the carriage on its way back.

Stealing seemed an easy task for him. It was the hiding and waiting that bored him to death.

"Who's there?" one of the queen's cooks once demanded.

Jack's eyes widened, a lump stuck in his throat. What was he going to do? If the cook opened the door to the closet, she'd find him and send him to the queen -who everyone believed ate children, and later confirmed she killed them by swimming in their blood.

"Show yourself or I will call the guards," the cook said.

"You go away," Jack replied in a muffled creepy voice from inside the closet. Then he shook the closet violently from inside.

"Holy mother of ghosts," the cook shivered. "Who are you?"

"I'm the spirit of the pig you just ate," Jack struggled not to laugh. "You think slicing and cooking me will go unpunished?"

"I'm sorry, but I am not the cook. I didn't eat you."

"If you hadn't cooked me, they wouldn't have eaten me."

Jack could hear the cook's teeth chattering. "Please forgive me."

"Only if you jump in the cooking pan and taste the heat and the pain of being cooked."

"But I am too big for the pan."

"Then slice off your arm and cook it in the pan." Jack snickered for a moment.

"Please, please. I don't want to die. I will do anything else."

"Anything?"

"Anything."

"Close your eyes then, and never open them until my spirit leaves this place."

"Of course. How long will you stay?"

"Keep your eyes closed and count the pigs in the sky."

"You mean the sheep?"

"They were never sheep. They've always been pigs."

"Of course. Of course. I will do what you tell me."

That day, Jack snuck out of the kitchen and hid in the carriage as it drove him back to the forest. Proud of his accomplishments, Jack strolled through the darkness until he saw two children, about seven or so, flinging beans on the ground.

"What a waste?" Jack protested. "Do you have any idea how many trees those beans could grow?"

"Do you have any idea that our mother is trying to kill us?" the girl said. "We use the beans as breadcrumbs to find our way back home after we escape from her wrath every night."

"Yes we do!" the girl's brother said. "Just like Fable said."

"Shut up, Axel," Fable said. "You don't have to repeat everything I say."

Jack took a moment, while staring at them, wondering what was wrong with the world. Why did the children fear their parents in Sorrow? Just like him and Jill. It seemed awkward and unbelievable. He let a long sigh. "I understand. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have interrupted."

"Wait," Fable said. "What's your name?"

"Jack Madly."

"The awesome one?" Axel chirped.

"You know me?"

"You're the most famous thief in Sorrow," Fable said. "The Queen of Sorrow wants your head chopped off."

"She believes you're behind the things disappearing from her castle," Axel said.

Jack couldn’t process the words fast enough. He was famous? And officially awesome.

Jack and the two siblings chatted for a while. It was the beginning of a long, long relationship, especially between him and Fable, who later helped him raid the Goblin Market many times.

And it was Fable that noticed the underlying sadness in Jack's eyes. Though merry, flamboyant, and certainly awesome, Jack seemed sad on the inside.

Fable in all her innocence told him so.

"I'm not sad," Jack said. "I'm aw.."

"...ful," Fable finished for him.

"Why are you calling me awful? Because I steal?"

"No, because you're escaping the things you feel inside. What's hurting you Jack? What are you trying to hide by being so awesome all the time?"

Jack didn't like Fable then, though they became better friends later. It was the first time someone had looked inside him and said things like they were. He didn't like it. He didn't like to remember bad things.

And so Jack left the brother and sister, after they had given him a handful of beans. He tucked them into his pocket and walked away.

With the sack on his back, he didn't feel like going back to his pumpkins on the tree. He needed a long and lonely walk in the forest. He walked for hours, lost in his thoughts. Maybe Fable was right. Maybe he had no business staying in Sorrow and he had to go back and face his vicious father.

A hand clamped on his mouth all of a sudden, and he found himself being pulled back into the shadows. Normally Jack would have fought back, but something about that hand scared him. It was a hairy hand. Like a wolf.

"Please don't hurt me," Jack wheezed.

"I won't." The hand pointed at the forest ahead. "But she will."

Jack squinted, following the path of the pointed finger. It took him a while to make sense of it.

"What are you talking about?" he asked the boy with the hairy hand. "You mean that red scarf floating between the trees?"

"It's not a scarf. It's the top of a cloak. A red cloak."

"Is that someone bad?"

"Bad is a point of view," said the boy with hairy hands. Jack thought his voice suggested he was of the same age. "It's a woman under that cloak."

"A woman? Why should I be scared of her? All the women I've met are friendly and caring." In his mind, even Fable was so. She was blunt enough with him because she cared about him.

"You could say the woman in the red cloak is also caring," the boy whispered. "Caring enough to kill you when your time comes."

"What are you talking about?"

"The woman in the red cloak is Death."

"You're funny. Death isn't a person."

"Says the boy who never died," the boy mocked him. "How would you know she isn't Death if she hasn't killed you?"

"Your logic is confusing. And how about you? Did you die before?"

"No, but my father did. And I saw her kill him," the boy said. "Now duck before she sees us."

Ducking, Jack finally saw the boy. He was hairy all over. Basically some kind of boy wolf. I, Grandmother Madly, had told him about werewolves before so Jack wasn't surprised. He just hadn't seen one before.

"Are you a werewolf?"

"No, I just don't shave much," said the boy.

Jack laughed. He liked cocky and funny people.

"I'm in the middle of transformation," the boy said. "I should return to a normal boy within a few moments."

"Why did you transform?"

"Most werewolves turn on full moons or when angered deeply. I turn when I am afraid."

"Let me guess," Jack whispered playfully, "death scared you?"

"She killed my father. I have to get revenge."

"But it must have been your father's time. I don't think Death kills people randomly."

"She has some kind of a list, yes, but I still have to avenge my father."

"How in the name of all the hair on your skin do you plan to do that?"

"Haven't figured that out yet."

"I'm Jack by the way," Jack offered without mentioning he was awesome. Frankly, he thought the boy was the real awesome. He turned into a wolf. That was something.

"I'm Wolfy."

"How original." Jack raised an eyebrow.

"No one makes fun of Prince Charming," the boy mentioned. "I mean, like me, his name sounds like an occupation."

"I thought Prince Charming was a myth. Someone the girls only read about in books."

"Sorrow is a weird place. Get used to it. Come on, I want to show you my books."

Jack followed Wolfy into a cavern, then into a den filled with books from top to bottom. In fact, he realized the walls were made of books stacked upon each other. In one candle-lit corner stood Wolfy's bed, made of more books stacked upon the other. Wolfy's bed covers were tens of pages knitted together.

"I chose the pages I didn't like in each book and sewed them together so I can feel warmer at night, that plus the fire, of course.

"If I were you, I'd just let myself get scared and cover myself with the hair," Jack said.

Wolfy stopped as he'd never thought of it. Then he shook his head and put on his reading glasses. The more his hair shrunk, the more Jack noticed how elegantly Wolfy was dressed. The boy was interesting.

"Wants pawn term, dare wasted ladle gull," Wolfy began reading from a book.

Jack didn't understand a word. Wolfy kept reading though.

"What language is that?" Jack asked.

"Anguish Language," Wolfy said.

"Never heard of it."

"Neither did I."

"Are you telling me you don't understand what you're reading?"

"Not a bit," Wolf said, proud of himself as he closed the door.

"Then why are you reading it?"

"It makes me feel good. It makes me feel like I am an avid reader."

"If you want to be an avid reader, go read books you can comprehend."

"That's the point exactly," Wolfy said. "You see most of these books are about algebra and cosmic theories. Some are about archeology and philosophy. I feel dumb when I read them."

"Really?"

"I'm a wolf, yes, but I'm only thirteen. I don't want to know about those things."

"But you also want to be an avid reader. I get it. So you read books you don’t understand."

"It feels good. You should try it sometime."

"I won't, but I will steal some good books for you next time. You deserve a good read."

"What kind of books are you planning to get me?"

"How about the Adventures of Robin Hood?"

"Robin Hood the thief?"

"He is a good thief."

"How can thief be good?"

"How can wolf read books?"

"You have a point," Wolfy said. "So tell me Jack, I hear you live in a tree."

"Yes, but who told you that?"

"Nothing is a secret in Sorrow. Trust me. But that's not an ordinary tree, you know that right?"

Jack didn't say anything. He wondered if Wolfy knew about the children in the pumpkins. Jack preferred to keep it a secret, to protect them.

"What do you know about the tree?" Jack asked.

"It's a strange tree and stranger are the people who live in the house next to it."

"The house is abandoned. I've never seen anyone in there."

"Did you ever enter it?"

Jack shrugged. It scared him to even think about it. The house, which was more of a small cottage, was creepy.

"See?" Wolfy winked. "It scared you. But hey, it scares me too."

"What do you know about it?"

"Someone lives in that house."

"But I told you, it looks abandoned."

"They want you to think that way. But believe me, I saw someone leave it one day."

"Who?"

"Death."



Jack's curiosity was piqued that day. And even though Fable's words about him escaping his past by occupying himself with anything that he came across still rang a bell, he stood there staring at the house next to the tree.

It was a creepy house indeed. The windows were dusty as if no one lived inside. The tree where Jack lived on top of was practically in the house's garden. So why didn't Death stop him living in it? Or was she so occupied with her job she didn't bother? Maybe she didn't want anyone to know she lived inside.

Jack plastered his nose against the windows, wishing he could see anything. In particular, he was curious about a young girl his age. Wolfy had told him about Death having a daughter who never left the house. Wolfy had once seen her and somehow fell in love with her.

Jack didn’t comment on the love part. Wolfy was weird, but Jack still liked him.

A few squirrels scurried out of the half open window on the side. Jack needed a moment to think about this. Wolfy had told him that Death's daughter adored squirrels.

So there is someone really living in there, Jack thought.

Jack, being the thief he was, had no trouble entering the house through the small gap in the window. But he wasn't planning on stealing anything. What would he possibly want to steal from Death? A scythe?

Inside, he could hear a girl laugh. It was a nice laugh, innocent and attractive in a deathly way, he supposed.

Jack was optimistic. He'd imagined Death’s daughter to be viscous and creepy, but this girl he was watching was some thirteen-year-old sweetheart. She seemed bonkers in a way, but clearly the squirrels loved her back.

"Hey!" She had noticed Jack's presence and turned instantly, holding a ladle in her defense. "How did you get in here?"

"The squirrels invited me." Jack leaned against the window and embodied Robin Hood's style.

“Did they?" The girl turned to her squirrels. *God,* Jack thought, *she is really naive.*

"I'm Jack Madly."

"I know," she said. "You live up there in the Tree of Life."

"Tree of Life? I didn't know it had a name?"

"It's my mother’s most precious tree. She planned on throwing you out, but she doesn't like to let anyone know we live here either, so she waited."

"Hmm..." Jack said. "Do you have any idea what your mother does?" Jack was going to saying *does for a living*, but it sounded strange to his ears. Death killed for a living.

The girl told him her mother brought bread and wine to the poor. Again, Jack wondered about Death's girl being so naive. He was more curious about the tree he lived in. "Tell more about the tree. Why is it called the Tree of Life?"

"I don't know." The girl shook her shoulders. "All I know is that it produces fortune cookies."

"What is a fortune cookie?"

"Small nuts like those squirrels like."

"Aha."

"Only these if you crush them open, you find a piece of paper inside."

"Paper?"

"And upon it is a name."

"Whose name?"

"I never know. My mother won’t let me pick up the cookies. I guess those are the names of the people she visits."

Immediately Jack understood. The tree handed Death the names of who she had to kill that day. Like when she killed Wolfy's father. But he didn't bother explaining it to the girl.

"What's your name?" he asked her.

"Ladle Rat," the girl chirped happily.

"Awful name," Jack mumbled.

"It's not awful. I like it."

"And I have to leave." Jack didn't find the conversation interesting. But the tree he lived in certainly was.

"Wait!" Ladle said. "Would come back and play with me?"

"No," Jack said. "You need to get out, Ladle. The world is much bigger than this small house." Jack left, uninterested in Ladle, though they too would become the best of friends.

Outside, Jack spent some time staring at the tree. He waited for a fortune cookie to drop, but nothing came. Only when he shook the tree did one fall in his hand. Jack didn't crush it or learn of the name inside. He simply tucked it in his pocket. He thought that keeping the name away from Death would save the life of whoever was next on Death's list.

Night was falling and he realized he'd had such an eventful day. It was time to climb up and feed his pumpkins.

The children ate and thanked him for the food. He could see how delicious the queen's food was. The children were really happy. He had even stolen some clothes for them, which were too big, but much appreciated.

Later, gathered around a small fire, the children told Jack a story he hadn't heard before.

"What kind of story?" asked Jack.

"The story about the real evil in the Kingdom of Sorrow," the girl in the pumpkin said.

"Real evil? Like the giant in the trees or the Queen of Sorrow?"

"Those are barely the evil we're talking about," another child said.

"There is something more evil than that?" Jack again remembered his evil father. Now who could top that kind of evil?

"The world of Sorrow and the Seven Seas are in a perpetual war," the girl said. "Good and Evil. White and Black. Sooner or later, you will get to choose a side, Jack."

"I'm colorless," he said munching on some food. "I'm only on my side."

"Trust us, not for too long. Sooner or later, you will have to choose."

"I doubt it."

"The Pied Piper will force you to choose."

“Who’s the Pied Piper?”

“The evil of all evils. He is the master of the black side.”

“A stupid name he has for an evil man. His name indicates he is merry and lovable.”

“He once was.”

“Then why is he evil now?”

“He’s been hurt by the Lost Seven’s ancestors.”

Jack dropped his food. It wasn’t the first time he’d heard about the Lost Seven. But he didn’t want to talk about them.

“The Piper vowed to chase them all over the world. Now that they’re in Sorrow, he is coming for them.”

“What do I have to do with this?”

“We think you’re one of them.”

“I’m not lost. I’m awesome.”

The children rolled their eyes. “Of course you are, but you will need to choose a side. You will need to find a man by the name of Charmwill Glimmer.”

“Glimmer?”

“He is the master of the white side, the good side.”

“Enough!” Jack said. “I don’t want to have anything to do with any of this. I’m a thief. I like it. I will always steal to feed the helpless, and I will always live in trees. That’s all.”

The children were taken aback by Jack’s mild temper. Like Fable, they’d always sensed he’d been hurt and doing his best to hide it.

One of them dared ask him, “You never tell us about your parents, Jack. Do you want to talk about it?”

Jack swallowed. Part of him resisted the offer. Another part appreciated someone was willing to listen.

“You can tell us,” the girl said.

“I lived far away in a land of perpetual snow,” Jack said, looking at his feet. “My mother was a good woman, but had always been weak and ill. She married a horrible man who was strong and intimidating. But he put food on the table and a roof over her head,”

“Oh.”

“That man is my father. My mother first gave birth to Jill, my sister, I was born later,” Jack said. “But my father always traveled, sometimes for months. And then, when he came back he’d…”

The children could sense Jack’s pain, so they didn’t insist on hearing the rest. If Jack had stopped at that, they’d have accepted it.

“Long story short, he hurt us, hurt my mother,” Jack continued. “And somehow, on some dark night in the snow, I managed to escape with Jill. But up the hill, she tripped and fell back toward the house.”

“Did your father get her?”

“I ran down after her, but Jill was tiny and she tumbled downhill quick. It was hard. I tried to pick her up and run in the snow. But there was my father, sneering at us and promising us punishment for life.”

“What happened then?”

“Like a coward, I ran for my life, promising Jill I’d come back for her one day.” Jack still wouldn’t face the children. They could hear him sob.

“Don’t worry, Jack,” they said. “You were afraid. At least now you can still go back and save her.”

“That’s the problem.”

“What is?”

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

“In my escape, I was so hungry I was about to die,” Jack explained. “I fainted in the snow, and heard voices in my head. I still don’t know if I imagined it or if the voice was of someone nearby. I heard the voice telling me it brought me a handful of beans.”

“Beans?”

“Beans I should plant in the snow.”

“That’s strange.”

“But it was hopeless, so I did,” Jack said. “I planted the beans, and enormous and magnificent tree rose from the barren snow.”

“One like this we’re in?”

“Much, much bigger. It spiraled up, reaching for the sky. I hung onto a branch and rose with it. And as it rose beyond the clouds, I saw an unbelievable thing.”

“What did you see Jack? What did you see?”

“You will not believe me.”

“Try us.”

“I saw splinters of mirrors hanging in the sky.”

“How so?”

“Don’t ask me. I think the sky was pouring mirrors and only the clouds protected the lands from the them.”

“We might not believe that,” one of the children chuckled.

“I told you. I had never seen anything like it.”

“What happened next?”

“I slept from tiredness upon the tree, and when I woke up, I found myself here in the Kingdom of Sorrow.”

“Wow,” one child said.

Another commented, “That’s why you’re obsessed with trees.”

A third child said, “You wish you’d see those mirrors again.”

“Not quite that.” Jack raised his head and faced them with teary eyes.

“What is it then?”

“Whatever I did, searching the trees, I lost my way back. I don’t know how to find Jill ever again. I shouldn’t have climbed that tree. I was so selfish.”



That night the children tried to cheer Jack up. They played hide and seek with the pumpkins and even performed a silly circus show for him.

But none of it washed Jack's pain away.

Then, when they slept, one child was still awake. The first one he'd ever saved. The one with the missing tooth.

"Jack," she said, catching him staring at the moon while dangling his legs from the tree.

"You should be sleeping now," he said.

"Yeth," she replied. "But I thought I'd tell you thomething that might help you get Jill back."

"Really?" Jack turned to face her.

"I don't know if it'll work, but my mother, before she lost me, used to tell me about it."

"Oh." Jack took off his green hat. It was time to listen. "What is it?"

"You know thothe thtarth up there in the thky?" She pointed at them. Many of them glittering in the dark night.

"What about them?"

"You think they're really thtarth?"

Jack squinted. "What else can they be? I heard they are other kingdoms, like ours."

"According to my mother, that'th the myth," the girl said. "Those thtarth aren't guiding lotht travelerth in the night like otherth claim."

"Maybe they're a source of light. Like the moon, helping us to find our way in the darkness."

"No. No." She neared him. "Let me tell you about thith thong my mother uthed to thing to me."

"What does the song have to do with this?"

"Jutht lithen tho me."

"I'm listening."

“Repeat after me, it’th a nice thong,” she whispered. “Twinkle, twinkle.”

“Pardon me?”

“Jutht thay it.”

“All right,” Jack smiled. “Twinkle, twinkle.”

“Little thtar.”

“Little star,” Jack followed.

Then they sang together:

Twinkle, twinkle, little star,

How I wonder what you are!

Jack definitely wondered about the stars, like he did about the moon. But he had to ask, “Again, how is this going to help me find my sister?”

“If you thay it until you fall thrsleep, it will answer you witheth and guide to where you can find Jill,” the girl said.

“I wish it was that easy.”

“It ith,” she insisted. “We jutht have to athk and the univerthe will thhow uth.”

“Such lies. You think I haven’t prayed for nights and nights to find my sister? This, whatever is up there in the sky, is just… well, a sky.”

“You’re wrong. The thtarth will hear your witheth.”

“Why are you so sure?”

“Becauthe we athked the thtarth for help before you came,” she said. “We athked the thtarth to thend uth thomeone kind, who’d thave us.”

Jack’s face changed. He didn’t know what to think about what she had just said.

“Jutht try it, pleath,” the girl insisted.

Jack nodded. “But you said the stars weren’t stars. Then what are they?”

“Didn’t you get it, Jack?”

“I’m a slow believer.”

“The thtarth are witheth.”

“Wishes?”

“Dangled from the thread of a thpindle like puppeth from the thky. They’re waiting for uth to grab them and with upon them. It’th jutht we’re tho conthumed by life we forget to athk.



That night, Jack sang this song on and on until he was about to sleep, but nothing happened. And he knew nothing would. He just did it so Jill wouldn’t be mad at him one day. So she wouldn’t accuse him of not knocking on all doors to find her.

Jack’s eyes trembled as he sank into the darkness of his dream, where he dreamed of Jill’s accusing face in their father’s hands as he ran again.

The same dream over and over again.

Jack jolted up, sweating, hardly breathing. Slowly he collected himself, staring at the twilight. Soon it would be dawn and the stars will totally disappear. All his wishes will disappear.

“Stupid stars,” Jack mumbled. “I’m too old to believe in fairy tales. I’m thirteen for God’s sake.”

He gathered himself for another day of stealing. Today he’d visit the queen’s castle again. And maybe try to visit that quirky girl in the house next to the tree.

Which reminded him of the fortune cookie in his pocket. Reaching inside he picked it up and stared at it. At least it felt good knowing Death would never know about the name inside. Jack must have a saved a life this way. It bothered him that Death picked names from a tree, but who was he to judge?

Now the question remained. Would he want to open the cookie? Would he want to know the name of the man or woman he’d saved?

Not a bad idea, he thought. He might pay that person a visit, too. They must live nearby, right? Or how would Death reach them?

More questions piled up in Jack's head. Did Death fly? If not, how did she reach people who lived far away? Or was Death simply a job, and there wasn't just one Death in red?

"Let's see." Jack curiously crushed the cookie against the branch in the tree.

The paper fell out.

It was crumpled.

Jack unfolded it.

The handwriting inside was thin and small.

He squinted, dawn pooling upon the world behind him.

Then something happened to Jack.

He couldn't breathe.

The name on the paper, it couldn't be true.

Jack winced and fell on his back, eyes looking upward where the stars had been before. The toothless girl was right. The stars were wishes, and they granted his.

But how was this possible?

The name on the paper from the cookie was Jill.



Knowing Jill was going to get killed by Death devastated Jack, but at the same time he couldn't believe the coincidence of accidentally saving her. This was the kind of accident too hard to believe or comprehend. Was fate involved in this? Was the universe — as he's always heard me talking about it — involved?

Shocked, Jacks leaned back to a branch, contemplating all the possibilities. Frankly, there were none. Not in a million years could he save his sister's life by an accident like that. Not in a million years would he have guessed he could wish upon a star and have his wish fulfilled. Sadly, the toothless girl told him the stars granted every one of us one wish… and one wish only.

But what did it mean to save his sister in such a cosmic coincidence?

For one, it meant his sister was alive. And two, she was nearby, not in that faraway place beyond the sky full of splinters.

How was that possible?

Did Jill cross over like him?

A broad smile painted itself on Jack's face. Then a whoop of laughter followed. *Jill, you brave girl. You must have done it and managed to escaped our father too. You must have found the beans and crossed over.*

Jack attempted a happy dance in his green uniform atop the tree, but then he stopped. Something was wrong. If Jill had crossed over to Sorrow, how come he hadn't meet her. How come she didn't look for him?

Slumping back on a pumpkin — this one had a child sleeping inside, but the child didn't bother because Jack needed the rest — Jack realized he'd been given a second chance to save his sister.

And this time, he'd be saving her from Death itself.



Back to me, his beloved Grandmother, Jack told me the whole story and I told him that I had been searching for him already. And that I had more news about Jill.

"The place you've been raised in, Jack, do you remember its name?" I asked.

He hesitated. I always knew that it scared him to recite its name. But now he did, because Jill was nearby and he'd do anything to save her.

"Forever Snow," Jack said. "That's where I was raised."

"I thought so," I said. "Listen, I have penetrated this place with the use of magic cards and have seen through to it, though I still have no means of crossing0 over."

"We don't need to cross over," Jack said. "Jill is here."

"I know," I nodded. "And here is what I know about her. Your father did the unforgiving to Jill."

“What did he do?” Jack pleaded.

“He sold her to the slave’s market.”

“What?”

“He needed money, and he was offered a deal. You know how young boys and girls are sold for hefty amounts of gold these days.”

“Where did he sell her?” Jack’s hatred for his father showed like the flame of the sun in the darkest of nights.

“The Goblin Market.”

“I can’t believe it. I heard about it.”

“Those short and ugly monsters pay money for the youngsters and keep feeding them the Forbidden Fruit.”

“Why?”

“The fruit helps them grow faster, prettier if girls, stronger if boys,” I said.

“You mean they treat them like ducks?”

“I guess you can say so. Then they resell them to the highest bidder. In our case, that would almost always be the Queen of Sorrow.”

“Why would she want the young boys and girls?”

“To swim in their blood,” I shrugged, but then changed the subject. Jack could only take so much horrific news about his sister. “Never mind. You’ll have to save your sister.”

“I’d do anything for her,” Jack said. “Listen, I will go to the market and steal her. I’m a good thief.”

“They won’t let you, Jack. You need to be smarter.”

“And do what?”

“You need to disguise yourself as a buyer.”

“A buyer?”

“Yes, you have to convince them you want to buy Jill. In fact, why not buy her for real? I wish I had gold to give you so you could buy her, but I don’t.”

Jack's eyes tensed for a while. I knew he was thinking. He had to find a way to steal the gold to buy his sister, but Jack had never stolen gold from anyone. Not even in the Sorrow's castle had he seen gold. Where would he get it from?



For two days Jack was planning, asking, and searching for someone in procession of a hefty amount of gold.

And again, it was his children who offered a way out.

"There ith only one for you to get it from," the toothless girl said. "But it'th dangerouth."

"I don't care. Where can I get it?"

And before the children told him, the thud in the trees sounded again. Jack followed the children's eyes skewing upwards.

"He has gold," they said. "A lot of it."

"The giant? Why would he have gold?

"That, we don't know about, but we saw it," a child said. "Before we met you, we used to watch him walk the trees. He loved pumpkins, so we were in danger. So we always rolled a few real pumpkins at him. Once, he dropped a stack of gold, and mumbled something about his mother being upset he lost it. Then he mumbled something about her being cheap for keeping a pyramid of gold stacked up in the trees without using it."

"He has a mother?"

"Imagine that," the toothless girl said. "Thhe mutht be really big."

"That's why we're going to steal this gold easily." Jack smirked.

"What do you mean? They'll squash us dead if we go near it."

"I think the opposite. We're like a fly on an elephant's trump. I really doubt they will catch us."

And like that, Jack and the pumpkin children searched for the stack of gold…

It would take another diary to tell you about Jack's adventure with the killer giant and how he got his gold, but it would distract from the awesome journey Jack took to save his children — and yes, that's the famous fairy tale about Jack and the giant everyone loves to lull their children with. Little do they know that it's the least of Jack's incredible adventures.

I will tell you about it later. But to whet your appetite for it, here's a sneak peek:

1) Jack succeed to steal the gold, but for a price he had to pay years later.

2) The giant's mother was a dwarf.



"You have to help me, Fable," Jack told her, now ready to save his sister. "I have the gold and have to get into the market."

"That's not hard to do. You're a thief," Fable said.

"The hardest part is disguising myself to look like a buyer of slaves," he told her. "I need to stand on your shoulders and hide behind this cloak so I look tall."

"I'm small, Jack. You will crush me."

"Then you stand upon my shoulders."

"Not a bad idea," Fable mused. "But with my pigtails, they'd never believe me."

"You can wear my hat. Also, we should use some mud on your face so you look like a dirty and rugged witch or something."

Fable grinned. "Speaking of witches, how about I cook you spell? I am a good witch."

"What?" Jack squinted. He didn't really trust her. She was about nine years old or something. What would she know?

"Let me do it, please," she said. "I've been waiting for my chance to prove myself as a witch. This is it."

"I can't risk it, Fable. This is Jill. I can't disappoint her again."

Fable stomped her feet and sighed, then crossed her arms. Sometimes she annoyed him, but she was a good hearted girl and he liked her.

“Listen,” he said. “I have an idea.”

“Better be good.”

“I think it is.” He titled his head toward Death’s cottage and smirked.

“What are you thinking, Jack?”

“The craziest idea in the world.”

“Death is the one who’s going after Jill when you save her. You don’t want her or her daughter involved.”

“Who said I’d get her involved?” Jack’s smirk widened.

Fable met him with a quizzical stare, then said, “I hope you’re not thinking what I am thinking.”

Jack laughed, excited. “But I hope you’re thinking what I am thinking.”



A day later, Fable hid behind the bushes, peeking into the Goblin Market. She’d been watching for hours, waiting for Jill to show up. Jack had described her in detail, and so Fable spotted her once she appeared.

Jill looked a bit older already, almost grown into a full woman. Fable scratched her head. Those Forbidden Fruits were something else. And, as one of the goblins had put it, “Her is Jill. She looks sad, but hey, she also looks delicious.”

Jill was dressed in the finest white dress, as if she were a bride. Her face was colorful and she had roses bunched into her hair. She was practically a doll in the market, and someone was going to buy her tonight.

Fable hated Jack and Jill’s father more and more by the minute. Was he really their father? How, and why would he do this to them?

“Jill the beauty,” the goblin master huffed. “Jill from the Hill.” He waved his arms theatrically. “Jill whose brother abandoned her. And guess what, her father sold her for five hundred shillings.”

Fable wanted to crash into the market and save the poor girl, but it wouldn't have worked. Fable was tiny and her witchcraft still sucked.

Where was Jack? What took him so long? He and his terrible plan.

Jill shivered in the cage they'd trapped her in. She listened to all those ugly men and women bidding for her left and right.

"Six hundred shillings!"

"One thousand!"

They seemed to like Jill a lot.

"Where the heck are you, Awesome Jack?" Fable gritted her teeth. Eventually, he'd never told her about his brilliant plan, but asked her to wait for him outside the market because he'd need her help later on. Fable wondered if he was disguised. Maybe he was the highest bidder in the crowd, that ugly man with the crooked long nose. *How did you disguise yourself like that, Jack?* she thought.

"Three thousand shillings!" the man with the crooked nose roared.

"Awesome," Fable giggled. "Jack turned out to be really awesome."

It made sense. Jack had the gold in his possession. All he needed was the disguise. She wondered if that Robin Hood man he'd always mentioned helped him with it.

"Three thousand and one shillings!" shouted a buyer from the crowd.

"I'll pay more. Five thousand shillings!" the crooked man said.

And then there was silence.

"Does anyone else want to raise the price?" the goblin master offered. "I don't see hands in the air."

The silence continued, only Jill's chattering teeth were audible.

"Jackpot!" groaned the goblin.

Fable had never heard the word before, but she thought it was ironic. Jackpot clearly meant Jack won. Soon he'd be saving his sister.

The goblins opened the cage but then cuffed Jill in shackles on her hands from the back. They pushed her toward Jack, the man with the crooked nose, but Jill resisted.

“Poor girl,” Fable said. “Jill doesn’t know it’s Jack saving her life.”

Jack paid the goblin and walked Jill to his carriage. A golden one in the shape of a huge pumpkin. Fable was impressed. When did Jack have the time to buy it?

And that’s when everything changed.

While Jack was dragging Jill to the carriage, someone else showed up in the market.

Fable shrieked.

Everyone else in the market caught their breath and dared not even move or attempt an escape. The scariest person on Earth just walked among them.

Death herself.

“Damn it,” Fable swore in whispers. “Of course, Death figured out Jack stole the fortune cookie and now came to finish her job of killing Jill.”

In Fable’s mind it made sense. Jill being sold as slave may have resulted in her death. She’d heard about so many slaves dying from bad treatment by their masters. It sounded like a possible turn of events. That must have been why the Tree of Life chose Jill to die so young.

“What can I do now?” Fable shuddered in her place. She’d never seen Death in her red cloak before.

Death’s face was black and hollow under the cloak, but it moved ever so confident, like a ticking watch, timed for the kill.

Everyone still held their breath, but when Death raised its scythe everyone screamed, begging for forgiveness, even the goblins. They sank down to their knees, hands laced before them, begging Death to spare them.

And of course, everyone promised to do good in life from this day on. Fable rolled her eyes so much she got dizzy.

But Death surprised everyone and snatched Jill from Jack’s arms. She didn’t even say anything, and Jack seemed pretty much tongue-tied. Death pulled the poor girl along, still not uttering a word, and disappeared in the dark.

Poor Jack, he wasn’t going to see his sister ever again.

“Is Death gone?” one of the buyers sobbed.

“I can’t believe I am still alive.”

“She wasn’t here for us, but for the girl we just sold,” the goblin master said. He seemed upset Death messed with his goods. “Next time, I need insurance that my slaves aren’t on Death’s list, you hear me? This is a waste of money!”

Fable wanted to run in and hug Jack as hard as he could. Poor, poor Jack. There was nothing awesome about any of this. How did this happen?

Unable to get inside the market now, she slid down against the tree and began crying. She’d started to like Jill. They could have been good friends. Why would the universe, and the stars, give Jack all these signs and end up taking Jill from Jack — again?

Opening her eyes, Fable saw something approach her in the dark. She couldn’t believe it. Was it Fable’s time to?

“Death,” Fable managed to say. “Please tell me I’m not on your list, too.

Death approached in silence, dragging Jill behind it. Fable realized Jill had passed out already, and now the red cloaked Death held her in its arms, approaching Fable.

“Why are you so cruel, Death?” Fable protested. “Jill was so young.”

“Shut up,” Death said in a boyish voice.

“What did you just say?”

Death pulled the cloak back, and Fable was at a loss for words. It was Jack.

“How in the world did you?” She pointed back at the market. “I mean… I just saw you bid for Jill. I’m so confused.”

“Shut up and tell me what I want to hear.” Jack smirked, hardly cradling his sister in his arms.

Fable knew what he wanted to hear. “You’re Jack Madly and you’re definitely awesome.”

They laughed.

“But where did you get the cloak from?”

“Stole it from Death’s house. I saw so many of those when I sneaked in again. I took one without Ladle taking notice.”

“But you’re tall.”

“Ah,” Jack said. “I almost forgot. Get out Axel.”

Exhausted, the chubby Axel let Jack off his back and leaned against a tree, panting.

“This is the most genius plan I’ve ever seen,” Fable said.

“I saved my sister, Fable,” Jack’s eyes gleamed. “I need to wake her up. It’s the best day in my life.”

“But wait,” Fable said. “Who was the ugly man with the crooked nose?”

“Just an ugly man with a crooked nose.”



I couldn’t believe my eyes, watching Jack visit me again with his sister in his arms.

“Oh, my!” I gently held her face in my hands. “You did it, Jack.”

“We need to wake her up,” he said. “I need you to make sure she is all right.”

“She will be, don’t worry. She must be just shocked. And she looks…”

“Older, I know,” Jack said. “They’ve been feeding her the Forbidden Fruit from the Goblin Market, to sell her faster.”

“I have a cure for that,” I said. “A spell that no one knows about.”

“Really?” His eyes gleamed as he laid her on the table. “You can bring her to her normal age again?”

“It will take a few days, though. And she may suffer a little, but she will be all right.”

Jack’s eyes watered. He brushed his hand over Jill’s face and kissed her forehead. “I’m sorry for all I have put you through, Jill.”

“Don’t be,” I assured him. “She will be forever grateful to you for saving her.”

“I can’t wait to hear her tell me herself.”

“Now go rest,” I told him. “I need to take care of her.”

He nodded and turned to walk away.

“And Jack…” I had to remind him. “By saving Jill you’ve made a lifelong enemy, you know that?”

“Yes,” he nodded. “The goblins.”

“Jill is worth it.”

“Of course. Besides, I may steal a few things from them, just to make them mad.” He put his hat on and bit on his favorite white rose, then winked.

An involuntarily laugh escaped me. “Why do I sense you’ve already done that?”

His face flushed red and he looked away from me, tapping his feet.

“Did you steal a Forbidden Fruit?” I offered.

“Nah, not yet,” he chuckled, looking my way. “I found this.”

Nearing it to me, I saw he stole a… spindle. And though I did not endorse his stealing habits, I wasn’t sure what the universe had in store for us that night. This spindle wasn’t an ordinary one. I had always heard it existed since I was a child, but had never seen it with my own eyes.

“Is it special?” he asked, eager to know.

“It is,” I said, still mending Jill. “It’s a Spindle, Spindle Little Star.”

“Don’t you mean the song? Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star?”

“No, I meant what I just said. Remember when you told me you wished upon a star to get Jill back?”

“Sure.”

“And that the stars weren’t really stars but wishes?”

He nodded.

“Did you know those wishes are hung down from the skies with a thread?”

“You’re joking.”

“I’m not, Jack. Why do you think stars are there one moment, closer in another?”

“I have no idea.”

“That’s because whoever holds them swings them like pendulum, sometimes they wave them a bit farther, sometimes a bit closer.”

“From the thread?” He scratched his head. “But they must be heavy to be held with a thread.”

“That would be right if they were *stars*, Jack.”

“I keep forgetting. They are wishes.”

“How do you weigh a wish?” I raised an eyebrow. “It’s impossible.”

“What does the spindle have to do with it?”

“The spindle belongs to a girl who lives in Sorrow. She is almost your age. She lives with her father, Rumpelstein, and her name is Rapunzel.”

“What about her?”

“Rapunzel has a gift. I’m not going to get into it, but let’s say she can weave with a spindle like no one else can.”

“And?” Jack seemed more confused than ever.

“This spindle is one the Goblins stole from her, though it seems they’ve not learned how to use it.”

“What does it do?”

“The strangest thing in the world,” I said, washing Jill’s feet. “So strange I’ve never understood the point of it.”

“Please, Grandmother. You’re killing me with curiosity.”

“See that thread at the end of the spindle?”

“I do.”

“It’s made of Rapunzel’s own hair. She has incredibly long hair.”

“That long?” Jack pointed, and he was right. The thread of hair, wrapped around the spindle, was so thick you’d imagine it’d stretch out for a respectable distance when unwrapped.

“Longer than you think,” I said, and pulled it loose, showing him how the hair defied gravity and instead of dangling from the spindle, rose up toward the ceiling of my little house.

“Wow,” Jack said. “Would it go further up if you’d unwrapped it outside?”

I nodded.

“But why? What’s the use for it?”

“No one really knows, but you can easily attach the spindle to a tree and then attach a pumpkin to it and let it float high in the sky, like a balloon.”

“I can’t believe this,” He said. “I can attach my sack of stolen items and hide high up in the sky. No one would be able to find it. The thread is so thin, no one would ever see it, let alone believe it can do what it does.”

“As long as they don’t know where you’re keeping the spindle that’s holding it, yes.”

Jack stared at the spindle for while then said, “But really, Grandmother, what’s the real use for it?”

“No one has ever known. It’s one of those things the universe has a grand purpose for, but no one has an idea why.”

“I’d like to have it back,” Jack said. “I’d like to give it to Jill when she wakes up. I love the idea of gifting her with something so special, even if it has no known purpose.”

I nodded, and handed it back to him. Then, at that instant, Jill opened her eyes.



In one of my later diaries, I’ll tell you so much more about Jill, but now I want to finish my story, and reach the point where things changed for the siblings forever.

Jack and Jill were the best brother and sister. Jill instantly forgave him, and Jack’s life turned into a living fairy tale. He introduced her to everyone he knew.

“This is my sister,” he’d say. “The one I’m living for.”

He introduced her to Fable and Axel, who loved her dearly. Then to Wolfy, who seemed busy with his books that day. Ladle was too shy to come out, and Jill thought the house was creepy so they never met. Jack thought he’d find a way to make it happen later.

And of course, and most important of all, he introduced Jill to his pumpkin children.

“The’th beautiful!” the toothless child chirped.

“You found your sister, Jack. Congrats!”

“We love her!”

Soon, Jill spent most of her time with the pumpkins, and now Jack wasn’t only feeding them, but taking responsibility for his sister too — which was the greatest feeling he’d ever experienced.

“Teach me how to steal,” Jill asked of him one day.

“No,” Jack tensed. “You’re never going to steal. You hear me.”

“But you do.”

“It’s different.”

“How different. Is it because I am girl, you think I can’t steal?”

“No, it’s not like that, Jill. Just forget it.”

“I want to know. I learn fast. I want to help feed the pumpkin children.”

“I’m a thief, Jill.”

“And I’m proud of you.”

Jack had always known she was naive, but he couldn’t help but laugh. “Trust me it’s not something to be proud of.”

“Why? You’re a good thief.”

“I know, but most people don’t see the difference. A thief is a thief. You’re not going to be one.”

“Then what am I going to be?”

“What do you mean, Jill?”

“I mean, I know I’m destined for something big.”

“Of course you are, but maybe it’s too soon to find out now.”

“You don’t understand.” She sat on a pumpkin, cheeks resting against her fists. “I heard Grandmother Madly talking to someone the other day.”

“What did you hear?”

“She said you are very special, and that by you finding me, the prophecy will take a good turn.”

“Prophecy?”

“What prophecy?”

“That’s all I heard. I thought if there is a prophecy I am going to be a thief like you. Maybe wear a green dress instead of your suit.”

Jack smiled. His sister was something. He sat next to her and wrapped his arm around her. “I don’t know anything about a prophecy. Grandmother Madly is full of secrets anyway.”

“You mean I am not special?” She almost wept.

Jack couldn’t adore his sister more. She had been through all this hell with their father and still didn’t know she was special enough. “You’re very special to me, Jill. Here, take this.”

He handed her the spindle, and though she had no idea what this little piece of wood was, her eyes glittered with mirth. “For me?”

“For you.”

“You’ve never brought me something before, Jack.”

“I know. I just didn’t know how much you meant to me.”

Immediately, she wrapped her arms around him. “I love you, Jack.”

“Love you too, Jill,” he said. Oh, how he’d waited for this moment for years. At only thirteen, Jack felt like a grown up who’d been through a lot already. “Don’t you want to know what this spindle does?”

Jill pulled back. “It does something?” she questioned. “I thought it was just something you stole for me.”

Jack laughed again. This time he told her what it was for, and for a few hours they had the time of their lives. Jill wrapped the end of the thread

around a pumpkin and let it fly up in the sky, as if it were a balloon or a kite.

She was so happy about it Jack was about to cry. On top of the Tree of Life she ran left and right with it, swinging the pumpkin in the sky.

“Look, Jack, the thread can reach so high!” she said.

Jack watched the magical thread rise so high, it almost touched the clouds, the pumpkin contracting into a small orange spot in the sky.

“It’s awesome!” the pumpkin children said. “Maybe it’s not only Jack who is awesome,” they teased him.

Jack didn’t mind. His sister’s happiness fulfilled his world. And it could have stayed like this forever… if they hadn’t heard the thud again.

Everyone froze in place. The thuds were getting louder. Nearer.

“What’s going on?” Jill asked.

“It’th the giant,” the toothless girl said. “Thith time he is clothe.”

“Do you think he is coming for us?” Jack asked.

Soon enough the answer came. The giant’s next thud shook the tree, and everyone held on to whatever they could.

“Where is my gold, Jack?!” the giant roared and a storm of his foul breath followed.

Jack ran toward Jill and together they ducked. “Listen,” he told her. “We have to escape. Let’s climb down. I stole his gold and he is very angry now.”

“What does he look like?” Jill was curious.

“The ugliest thing you’ve ever seen. Now, come on, Jill.”

“But we can’t climb down, Jack.” She pointed at the giant’s feet so close, blocking the side they used for climbing the tree.

“Run!” the toothless girl shouted.

And so everyone ran away, jumping from one tree to another, until it was impossible to jump because of the increased distance between trees. The pumpkins, previously trained by Jack, used the vines and swung from here to there.

Jack had to make Jill wrap her arms around his back as he swung like a monkey from place to place, doing his best to escape the giant.

“Only a couple of treeth and we’ll be clothe to the waterfall,” the toothless girl said. “We could jump in and ethcape him.”

“I can’t swim,” Jill said.

“Don’t worry, I can. I’ll take care of you,” Jack said, clutching on another vine and swinging over to the first tree.

“One more tree and we can jump,” the toothless girl announced, though the giant seemed restless, only a few trees behind them.

“Are you sure he can’t jump into the water?” Jill asked.

“It’s our only choice. I sure hope he can’t,” Jack said, panting. “Just hang on. It’s only one more…”

Jack’s words didn’t leave his mouth, which stood open wide, his eyes in sheer panic.

“Who’s that?” Jill pointed at who stood before them, blocking the jump into the waterfall.

“Oh, my God!” the children squealed in horror, staring at the same person.

“Who is that?” Jill insisted, pointing at the person.

Jack shrugged, frozen in place, the giant’s thuds behind him fading into oblivion.

“Who is that, Jack? Who is that in the red cloak?” Jill said again.

“It’s Death,” Jack said.

Then Death spoke for the first time. “You shouldn’t have saved her, Jack.”

Jill seemed like she was still trying to process what was going on. She didn’t understand why everyone had stopped while the giant was so close to squashing them underneath his large feet.

“The universe demands balance,” Death said to Jack. “And you disrupted that balance by taking the fortune cookie.”

“Then the universe shouldn’t have sent the cookie my way,” Jack responded.

Though her face was unrecognizable under the cloak, Jack knew his words offended her. He saw her raise her scythe up, ready to take Jill’s life.

Without thinking, Jack turned back and ran in the other direction with Jill on his back.

“What are you doing?” Jill protested. “The giant is in this direction.”

“We have no choice,” Jack panted, Jill’s was getting heavier by the minute. In his mind he could not believe he was running away from Death itself.

Then he slowed down, just a little, staring at the giant a few feet ahead. He stole a glance back, and Death was coming after them.

Jack and Jill went up a tree…

He was stuck. He had to think fast.

“Jill,” he put her down and ducked with her, then held her by the arms. “There is only one way out.”

“What?”

“This.” He pointed at the spindle.

“How so?” She was already shivering, scared.

“I’ll wrap you up with the thread on the spindle.”

“Are you crazy?” she said. “I’ll float up in the sky.”

“But they will never find you,” Jack assured her. “I know the trees by heart. I will come back later and get you when Death and the giant are gone.”

“But Jack,” she was about to cry again.

“I know.” He hugged her. “You think I will give up on you like last time.”

She nodded into his shoulders.

“I will not.” He squeezed her harder. “I’m only feeling alive because I found you, Jill. We have no time.”

Reluctantly, Jill let him wrap her up. Jack kissed her on the forehead and joked. “None of us has ever been so close to the stars.”

She let out a little laugh, wiping away her tears.

Jack wrapped the remainder of the thread still on the spindle around a tree shadowed by another much larger one, so it wouldn’t be easy to spot, and then let Jill float upward.

Though Death and the giant neared them, he could not leave before he’d seen Jill’s last waving hands from up high.

Then Jack waited for Death to arrive. Oh, how angry she was, unable to find Jill. Jack kept his mouth shut, and waited for the giant to arrive too.

The giant, big and useless, acted like a squirrel seeing Death. In fact, he ran back all the way. It was only Jack and Death on the tree now.

“You’re playing with fire, Jack,” Death said. “The universe will promise you misery for life for doing this.”

“I’m fine with misery. In fact, we’ve been friends for a while. But my sister gets to live.”

“Don’t think I will ever stop hunting her,” Death warned and walked away.

“Don’t think I will ever stop protecting her,” Jack said to her back.



After waiting until Death gave up and disappeared, Jack met with the pumpkin children again.

“Are you sure Death is gone?” Jack said.

“We’ve followed her back to her home,” the toothless girl said. “She is cooking for her daughter, who by the way doethn’t know her mother ith Death.”

“Great,” Jack said. “Let’s get Jill back down.

He turned to find the spindle in the tree, but what he saw changed his life forever. It wasn’t that the spindle was gone.

It was still there.

But it was the thread that had been cut.

“The giant must have ripped it while running back,” the toothless girl offered, her eyes moist, staring at the night sky above.

“Jill.” Jack fell to his knees. “What have I done?”

The children’s necks all craned up, watching the night sky in silence. It was full of stars, and Jill was up there somewhere.

“Shouldn’t she fall, now that she’d detached from the spindle?” a child asked.

“No,” another said. “It’s the thread that floats. The spindle is just to locate it on the ground.”

“So she will keep floating forever?” a third asked.

“Looks like it,” a fourth speculated.

That was when I arrived. Jack’s stare at me was blank, devoid of anything. It was like he’d stopped feeling from that day on.

“How did this happen?” He stared at his hands that had attached spindle. “Jill told me you said we were both special.”

“You are,” I said.

“But she is gone, Grandmother Madly.” He pointed up at the sky full of stars.

“She’s not gone, Jack,” I said. “She is just up there.”

“She will die up there,” he said.

“I’m not sure about that. Remember when I told you about the universe having its ways and own plans with our fates? Remember when I told you I never knew what the spindle was for?”

“Yes?” He grimaced, not welcoming my conversation.

“One thing I haven’t told you,” I said. “That if it so happens that the thread is cut, whatever, whoever is attached to it, turns into a…”

“Turns into what?” Jack stood up.

“Calm down,” I said. “You have to know the universe has a plan…”

“Turns into what?” Jack discarded my words.

This time I had to answer him. I had to tell him about what would have a great influence on the fate of Lost Seven later on. I said. “Turns into a star.”

End of Diary

MY NOTES

Written by the Beast

I loved *Spindle, Spindle Little Star*. I loved meeting Jack again – and Robin Hood!

And I'm so ready to know more about Jill. Who'd would have thought she is the Star?

I sit down to contemplate everything I've read. So many questions. So many that things don't make sense sometimes. But I'm drawn to the stories in a way I've never been to anything before. I feel like every story has more to it than I've comprehended. That there are clues to the coming answers, thrown left and right. It's just me who can't interpret them.

Before I go to the next shelf of prequel, I'm going to leave the library and sit beside the nearest window tonight.

Why? I'm going to wish upon a star.

What kind of wish? That Beauty comes back for me. We can work this out. I'm learning my lesson. *Things must be loved before they are lovely.* I will be there for her. Grant her every wish, even if it will demand that I still play my part as a Beast and that she'd despise me and hate me.

I'm okay with that. Because when you're in love you can't hate anymore, even if you're the Beast himself.

Then, after I wish upon that star, I will make a list of the possible Lost Sevens. I know about five or six now. I find it ironic that the one I don't know anything about is probably me.

The Beast, who once was Beauty.

Thank You

There aren't enough words to express my gratitude. Writing this series in particular is such a joy. I write it with such ease I can't make sense of, and it blesses me with hours of researching and collecting older fairy tale books, which is a great obsession of mine.

The following set of prequels should be on its way before the end of the year. I've written a few. One of them is called the Singing Bone, which I really like.

On a side note, I've created a Pinterest page for the Grimm Prequels where you will find many pictures of historical places visited soon. For now, you can download or pin every Grimm Prequel cover ever released, the ones in this boxset, plus brand new covers for older prequels.

You can find the Pinterest Page HERE

Stay fabulous,

Cameron

Subscribe to Cameron's Mailing List

To receive exclusive updates from Cameron Jace and to be the first to get your hands on next prequels and everything else that connected to the Grimm Diaries world, PLUS free short stories, sign up to be on the mailing list!

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About the Author

The part that matters:

Cameron Jace is a Storykiller. He kills older stories, resurrects them into larger than life tales, and then weaves them into facts & fiction. An obsessive collector of out-of-print books with a fascination with folklore and those who wrote it. He wonders if it's possible to track back to the first story ever told.

The part that is nothing but propaganda:

Cameron is the bestselling author of the Grimm Diaries series and the Insanity series. Three of his books made Amazon's Top 100 Customer Favorites books for 2013. He is a graduate of the College of Architecture, a musician, but prefers building fortresses of imagination over a house. Cameron lives in California with his girlfriend. He loves to hear from you:

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